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The House of Riddles

BY

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"THE THREE ESSENTIALS," "MADE OF MONEY," "THE BLOOD TAX," ETC.

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THE HOUSE OF RIDDLES

PROLOGUE

"OUR sights?" said the large and placid Professor Annicker to the small and spasmodic Professor Merritt, as, arm-in-arm, they strolled through the sleepily picturesque streets of St. Damian—"they can be summed up in two words: Links and Ruins. Plenty of decayed churches and cloisters on the one hand, and any amount of bunkers and caddies on the other. It's a place only to be satisfactorily inhabited by antiquarians or golfers. No use for the ordinary mortal here—unless he wears a cap and gown. Ha, ha!"

"Which means that he *isn't* an ordinary mortal. Hi, hi!"

Professor Merritt gleefully pressed his friend's arm. It was to take possession of the Chair of Mineralogy that this little wizened person had but yesterday entered the Scottish coast town, which, eternally dripping with the salt breath of the North Sea, squatted around its ancient university. His

former schoolfellow and present colleague was well entitled to do the honours of the place, seeing that it was now quite fifteen years that Professor Annicker had, very literally, "filled" the Chair of Philosophy at the chief of the colleges.

They had passed by various broken towers soaring against the grey sky, sea-gull haunted, and many a stretch of crumbling ivy-infested wall, when the mentor stood still before a small house placed a little back from the street, behind a neglected front garden.

"Since you're on the look-out for sights, you may as well include that."

The Professor of Mineralogy blinked his small but keen eyes at the object indicated.

"That funny little house? It looks rather quaint, certainly, but — is there anything particular the matter with it?"

"That's what nobody seems able to make up their minds about. Officially, it is described as 'Fifty-two Bower Street.' But the natives have got another name for it. They call it the House of Riddles."

"Ah—and that means—?"

"That a few queer things have happened in it. In fact, if you believe the native, nothing *except* queer things ever happen there. It's almost superfluous to remark that it is richly credited with ghosts. Considering that it is a remnant of the former Capuchin Monastery, it is perhaps equally superfluous to say that it is bound to have a walled-up monk

somewhere on the premises. In the popular belief, it has been inhabited in turn by an escaped criminal and by a Master of the Black Arts. But its bad reputation has more modern grounds than these legends, for not twenty years ago it was used as a den of forgers. Thousands of pounds in counterfeit bank-notes are supposed to have been smuggled out of it with a secrecy which baffled all detective arts. And Justice too was baffled, for when the house was broken into, the birds were found to have flown, traceless. People talk of secret exits, of underground passages—what do I know? There's no limit to the imagination of St. Damian's; and small wonder either, fed as it is on the suggestions of the past. In a place that positively stinks of mediævalism, it is sometimes hard to draw the line between the possible and the impossible."

They stood on the pavement, peering over the mildewed paling, and across the tiny, weedy garden, half choked with shrubs, and in which a few remnants of boxwood borders alone spoke of paths which had ceased to exist. The grey, one - storeyed mansion looked absurdly massive in proportion to its size, and utterly out of place between its two modern and respectably bow - windowed neighbours. Out of place, too, looked the squat little tower which jutted out, all but windowless, from the right-hand corner of the building. A broad, iron - studded door occupied the centre of the front wall; three small windows, closely blinded, were ranged above.

"Looks like a place where things might happen, eh? That door leads right through the body of the house and into a small courtyard within."

"It's uninhabited, I suppose?"

"No, it isn't. That's the funny part of it. It was so for years, but just about a year ago it changed hands. The new possessor—an old lady of the name of Wilson, or Simpson, I forget which—was seen only quite *en passant* on the day she crossed its threshold. She has never been seen since, and as far as can be ascertained, she has never re-crossed the threshold."

"An invalid, I suppose?"

"Nobody quite knows. But seeing that she apparently waits on herself, she can't be much of an invalid."

"But she must have servants?"

"That's just what she hasn't got. No mortal soul went in with her, and no mortal soul is known to have gone in since."

"She doesn't live on air, I suppose?"

"Her food is supplied all right by the local tradesmen, but to an invisible client. It's quite a simple arrangement: A basket placed on the doorstep in the inner yard—or a can, as the case may be—and a slip of paper containing the orders for the day. The coalman gets his orders by the post, and finds the coal-house unlocked and ready; but neither butcher, baker nor candlestick-maker—and it's only they who penetrate into the yard—have ever seen

so much as a face at a window. The House of Riddles is living up to its reputation, as you see."

"And the latest riddle remains unsolved?"

"Unsolved. A miser, some people say—a mere oddity, say others—but it's guess-work, at best."

"Well, I hope you have something more cheerful to show me than this mouldy mansion," grinned the Professor of Mineralogy, as they resumed their walk.

"Here is something more cheerful," announced the man of Philosophy, as a few minutes later they emerged upon the links. "Madame de Logez at her first hole," he added *sotto voce*. "I say, you're in luck, old man. She's one of our sights too, in a way, though a rather recent one. Wait till she turns, and then tell me whether in all your world-wanderings you've seen many faces like that."

At about twenty paces off Professor Merritt became aware of a well-to-do-looking couple. The rapt attitude of the small and exquisitely slender woman's figure, the earnest bend of the dark head, made it clear that the unseen eyes were fixed on the ball she was preparing to drive off. Two paces from her stood a large, pale, black-haired young man, of a striking and vaguely repellent appearance. His attitude too was rapt, but it was not at the ball he was looking, it was at his companion's face.

It was only when the great moment was over that she turned sufficiently to satisfy Professor Merritt's awakened curiosity.

"Well?" queried his companion. "I promised

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you a treat. Why don't you say anything? You're not disappointed, are you?"

The small Professor was following the dark-haired woman with his eyes, in which a certain surprise, bordering on perplexity, stood written.

"No, I'm not disappointed; but I've a notion, in fact I'm almost certain, that I've seen that face before, but can't place her, somehow."

"Not as easily as you could place a new ore, eh? With your nose perpetually poking into the bowels of the earth, it's rather a wonder that any woman's face should stick in your memory. Get along, Professor, I believe you're a sham, after all!"

And the man of Philosophy poked the man of Minerals jocosely in the ribs.

"Who is she?"

"A Californian widow, they say; but the fact is, that she's a bit of a riddle too. Appeared quite abruptly at St. Damian's last year, and rented Craig Manor. She seems to have money, but not the shadow of a connection in the country, and St. Damian's hasn't yet done breaking its head as to the reason why a rich and apparently gay outlandish widow should bury herself here, of all places."

"Perhaps it was the links that formed the attraction."

"Scarcely, since she didn't know how to take hold of a club a year ago. It's only since she put herself into the hands of her present instructor that her ardour for the game seems to have awakened."

"*His* ardour seems to be pretty lively, I should say. Hi, hi!"

"Ah, he's hooked, and no mistake. St. Damian is getting rather impatient for the inevitable announcement."

"A native?"

"Yes; of the name of Kennedy—came into the property rather unexpectedly about eighteen months ago. Married brother suddenly died childless (the Kennedys have got a very pronounced family 'heart.') This man had to be fetched from the ends of the earth, where he had been fortune-hunting at all sorts of places: Cape Town, Klondyke, what do I know? Always counted as the black sheep of the family."

The small Professor suddenly stood still, and pounded his stick upon a clump of unoffending daisies.

"I've got it now!" he said decisively. "I've placed her. Klondyke! That word has done it."

And he proceeded to recount how, between two and three years ago, when engaged on a professional excursion to the Northern gold-fields whose composition he was anxious to study, he had noted among his fellow-passengers on the river steamer a singularly attractive brunette, whom he had found some difficulty in classifying.

"She gave herself out as a lady-journalist on the track of 'copy,' but somehow I didn't believe her, though I pretended to, and got the most awful snub

in reward for my pains. 'It's the details of the lynching case you are collecting for your paper, I suppose?' I said to her, in the most harmless manner in the world, for this was just after that kick-up at one of the settlements, when two cousins of the name of Cameron, working on one claim, struck gold, and one promptly put the other out of the way by means of a pocket-knife, and was as promptly strung up by the community at large. You must have heard of the affair."

"I should think so. Why, Cameron was an Aberdeenshire man. His portrait was in all the papers."

"Could a lady-journalist wish for a richer harvest of horrors? And yet, at my harmless suggestion the little beauty almost jumped into my face. How could I imagine that she would ever pander to the taste for vulgar sensation? The whole affair had been disgraceful, and the less said about it the better. For some reason or other, the subject seemed to irritate her quite unaccountably; and she flounced off into her cabin without giving me the chance of an apology."

"And when she got to the gold-fields, did she collect details?"

"I haven't a notion what she did, being far too busy with my ores to have any attention over for unmannerly young women. In fact, from the moment of disembarkation, I never set eyes upon her again until to-day."

Prologue

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"And you're positive it's the same person?"

"Positive."

"H'm! Your experience doesn't seem to throw much light on the riddle, does it?"

"Can't say it does. A rich Californian widow, you say? Maybe; but she certainly didn't convey the impression of wealth two years ago. The money must have turned up since. Funny to have run across her here. It's but a poky place, after all, this world of ours. I wonder if she'd snub me again if I claimed acquaintance?"

CHAPTER I

THE "FIND"

THE "Star of Hope" saloon was full to overflowing—of men, of smoke, of glaring kerosene lamps, of certain noises that passed for music, and other noises that did their best to beat them, while the smell of gin in the air could, in miner's language, be "cut with a knife." It was the Star of Hope's chronic condition at this midnight hour, but to-day, owing to an abnormal "find" on one of the claims, and to a consequent standing of drinks "all round" by the lucky finders, the condition had become acute.

There were two of them, both young and both good-looking, though with little resemblance between them, despite their cousinship—Dick Cameron being square-shouldered and fair-haired, while Johnnie was a slight, rather fragile-looking youth, with dark hair and eyes. They had been working in partnership for a year, hoping against hope, having staked their little all—and it was very little indeed—upon their luck in this Northern gold-field, Dick eating out his lover's heart the while—for this boy had a girl-wife waiting for him in New York—for him and for the good fortune that was to make their future possible ;

since, having recovered from the first intoxication of the dream in which, against the advice of all their friends, they had united their lots, even the wisdom of twenty and of twenty-two agreed on the present impossibility of the outlook.

It was at the time of the first Klondyke fever; and for the Klondyke gold - fields Dick finally decided. It meant a separation, of course; but with the optimism of their years, the couple felt certain that it would not be for long. New York was the spot of earth on which they had met, and in New York it was that Elvira remained absolutely alone, but quite confident in her powers of taking care of herself, and of keeping clear of want by means of her needle, which she plied with an address that had done her good service ere now.

So Dick had gone, but not alone, being at the eleventh hour joined by his youthful cousin, to whom he had always been more elder brother than cousin, and who, having shared most of Dick's ventures since the days of tame guinea - pigs and illicit fishing-tackle, had elected to share this one.

And now, after a year of hope deferred, the good thing had come true. To-day the "find" had been verified beyond all doubt. The event seemed to have gone to both young heads, though more conspicuously to that of the elder Cameron. As he moved about the smoke-thickened room, exuberantly replying to the universal felicitations, there was a brilliancy in his eye which spoke of an

intoxication that was by no means exclusively physical. And no wonder either, seeing what vision he fed upon in spirit.

"So you've done it, Dick, you've done it! And now we shall always be together, won't we—?" He could almost have sworn to the words that would greet him.

Always together! He should rather think so, nor need she ever again prick her sweet fingers over that detestable sewing. What a princess he would make of her—ha, ha!"

Excited though he was himself, Johnnie's excitement struck him as exaggerated; for Johnnie had been working only for himself—had (beyond his cousin) no kit or cat in the world that belonged to him—while he, the lucky Dick, had been working for a woman—and such a woman, too!"

"Another tippie?" suggested a semi-drunken and wholly ecstatic voice.

Though some of the company were sober, all of them were in ecstasies. The day was being celebrated as one glorious in the annals of the settlement. Not a trace of envy or grudge. Was not the incident big with hope for everybody, and more especially for the fortunates whose claims adjoined the Camerons? Never had the Star of Hope more completely justified its name. The most sceptical had to admit that the character of the district had once more been richly vindicated.

"Gin or whisky?" asked the siren at the bar,

as Johnnie held out his glass for something like a seventh helping.

The tone was professional, but not so the glance, as over the top of the counter against which the youth was blissfully sprawling they exchanged a long look.

"Wax-doll Bella," as she was popularly described, was anything but the typical goddess of such places. It was to her silky yellow hair, improbably long eye-lashes, and genuinely pink cheeks that she owed her appellation. But if she suggested a wax doll, it was one of so superior a sort as to seem incongruous in these surroundings, which was perhaps the very reason why she so infallibly went to the head of every new-comer with disengaged affections. To have so expensive-looking a plaything at their disposal could not but flatter the vanity of the rough community. Even the personal neatness, almost primness of her appearance, had its part in raising them in their own estimation.

While Johnnie still lounged against the bar, the door of the saloon opened once more. Several glances of surprise turned towards the new-comer, for the surly-looking Kennedy, a countryman of the Camerons, ranged as a misanthrope. He was black-haired and well-set-up, but with something in his pale face which repulsed, though few people took the trouble to analyse the cause of the repulsion.

Without looking to the right or to the left, he went straight up to the bar.

"A gin and bitters," he said gruffly to the girl.

As he spoke his ill-humoured eyes fell upon the hand with which Johnnie was clutching his glass, and instantly became riveted. On the fourth finger of that hand there stuck a curious, rather clumsy ring, adorned with an irregularly square-cut opal set in small, dull turquoises. It was upon this ring that Kennedy's eyes had fastened with a savage fixity, to shoot back to the girl's face, full of things unspoken.

The superior wax doll seemed to understand them, nevertheless, for the pink in her cheeks spread suddenly to her forehead, nor could her hand have been as steady as usual, for she actually upset some of the liquor with which she was serving the new customer.

When he had moved off without a word, anyone with disengaged attention might have seen Bella bend forward and say something to Johnnie in what looked like an earnest whisper, whereupon the elated youth only shook his head, and then proceeded to chuck her under the chin. But nobody's attention was disengaged, so that the incident passed unremarked.

It was about an hour later that the two Camerons, neither of them unimpeachably steady on their legs, set out for their primitive abode about two miles off. Kennedy, whose claim lay in the same direction, after sulking for a space in a corner of the saloon, had withdrawn some time ago.

The Camerons were little more than half-way to their temporary home, steering with comparative ease in the merciful transparency of the arctic night, when Dick, feeling in his pockets for his pipe, missed that, to a miner, most indispensable of all instruments: his pocket-knife.

"Must have left it at the Star," he ruefully remarked. "I had it out to cut tobacco, if I reclect. Go ahead, Johnnie, and I'll follow. The saloon mayn't be shut up yet. I wouldn't lose that knife for a good deal. Sharpest knife in the place."

He had retraced his path for a hundred paces or so, when it suddenly struck him that this was nonsense. He had remembered that he was a millionaire—in embryo, anyway—and that the relative value of things had changed since yesterday.

It was absurd for a millionaire to walk two miles for a knife that cost half-a-dollar. He would catch up Johnnie, or no, perhaps he would take a rest first. There was a certain heaviness in his limbs and a certain whirliness in his head which made a momentary halt appear advisable—for the drinks dispensed by Wax-doll Bella were powerful, and the occasion had proved too much for his habitual sobriety.

It was on a cushion of feathery moss that he happened to alight, a cushion large enough to be a mattress, to which use, within about a minute, it was actually put. The combination of its enticing texture and of the drowsiness that was beginning

to clog the wheels in his brain could result in only one thing.

Hours later he was awakened by a rough hand on his shoulder. There were voices too, in his ear—unfriendly voices, it seemed to him before even he was well awake. Dazed, but with gradually clearing faculties, he sat up. Several men stood beside him, most of whom he knew by sight, and all of whom seemed to be labouring under some common excitement.

"Here he is!" were the first words that completely penetrated to his faculties, upon which an echoing chorus of:

"Here he is!" rose ominously around him.

In the half-dozen pairs of eyes fixed upon his face, the same eyes that had beamed upon him in the saloon last night—there was menace, and there was also something very like horror.

"What is the matter?" he asked, bewildered.

"That's what we want you to tell us. Where's your partner, eh? What have you done with him?"

"My partner? Johnnie? I haven't seen him since—let me see—since last night on the way home."

"Ah, you haven't, have you? Then come along and look at him now."

And several hands helped him rather violently to his feet.

"I don't understand," he stammered.

"You'll understand fast enough when you get to

your claim. Are you coming on your own legs, or have you got to be carried?"

He was being hustled along already before the question was done asking.

The pace at which the mile which separated him from his tent was traversed was not favourable to the gathering of information, and to the few questions he managed to gasp out, all the answer Dick got was an encouragement to "come on," and the assurance that he would soon know all about it—more, perhaps, than he would care to.

There were more miners standing around the log hut which he had shared all summer with Johnnie, and they too appeared excited, and cast upon him the same looks of mingled menace and horror which had puzzled him in his captors.

The door stood open, and through it he felt himself pushed with a vigour which would have rendered resistance vain, had he thought of resisting.

"Is that your partner, or is it not?" shouted a furious giant at his side, pointing a huge finger at something on the floor.

Looking where he was bid, Dick saw his young cousin lying flat upon his back with horribly up-turned eyeballs, with his blood-stained shirt torn wide, and a deep gash upon his chest.

"Is he dead?" he asked, beneath his breath.

The furious giant turned to the scarcely calmer audience.

"Hear that, mates? Is he dead? That's the kind

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o' brass he's made of. Maybe he's afraid of not having done the job clean enough, and of the lad coming round to claim his share of the gold. Dead as a door-nail—that's what he is: and these gentlemen are waiting to hear what light you may be good enough to throw upon the *sitooashun*. Happen, you've something to say—if so, speak out!"

But instead of speaking out, Dick stood staring stupidly at the body on the floor, oblivious of the circle of threatening eyes. He was quite sober now, but the recent carouse had left a certain emptiness in his brain which made it difficult, upon so short a notice, to deal with so crucial a moment as this.

CHAPTER II

CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE

"DOESN'T look as if he had overmuch to say for himself, does he?" asked the triumphant giant.

A man who had once been a London barrister, and in whose degenerate soul there still lingered some traces of professional respect for the law, gripped Dick by the shoulder.

"Wake up, man! Give an account of yourself. We all of us saw you setting out with your partner last night, and nobody has seen your partner alive since then. Give an account of yourself! To start with: When did you reach home?"

"I didn't reach home at all," said Dick slowly, struggling to collect his thoughts, and noticing meanwhile, in a dull, unreasoning sort of way, which did not rise to the drawing of conclusions, that the earth-floor of the cabin was badly trampled, and that one of the stools that served as chairs had been upset.

"Oh, you didn't reach home at all, eh?"

The ex-barrister folded his ragged arms in one of the favourite attitudes of the profession, and eyed Dick with as icy a politeness as ever prisoner in the dock was eyed by the counsel for the prosecution.

"How are we to understand that, pray? Would you mind telling us where you spent the night?"

"I spent it on the hill-side."

"Oh! And what made you prefer the hill-side to your cabin, if I may ask?"

"Didn't like the company of the corpse," suggested a bystander, and was immediately reproved by a glance from the individual who seemed bent on carrying through the cross-questioning of the accused with as close an approach to "correctness" as the circumstances permitted.

"I missed my knife," began Dick; and at the word "knife" there was a general movement of attention among the crowd, pressing in to the hut and growing with every minute—for it had been ascertained some time ago by an ex-doctor (almost every second of these gold-seekers was an ex-something or other) that the wound which had caused the victim's death proceeded undoubtedly from a knife.

"I missed my knife when we were on the road and turned back to fetch it from the saloon."

"Did anyone see him at the saloon after 2 a.m.?" asked the cross-questioner, sweeping his eyes round the circle of faces.

"I never got there; I changed my mind about fetching the knife. It didn't seem worth while after yesterday's find. I sat down instead to take a rest, and—I suppose I must have gone to sleep."

Even as he spoke, the improbability of his own story struck Dick so forcibly that with the last words

his voice wavered, as though under the weight of some sudden doubt.

The dull murmur around him was only too well calculated to feed his alarm, and yet he was not really frightened yet. It could not be that his own guiltlessness should not come to light.

"Then when do you want us to believe that you saw your partner last?"

"I saw him last when I turned back towards the saloon."

"And can you suggest any explanation of the way he came to his end?"

"I can suggest nothing," said Dick despondently, "and I understand nothing."

"So it would seem. You are not aware of his having had any enemy?"

"No."

The majority of the crowd listened respectfully, slightly awed, and at the same time raised in its own self-esteem by seeing things done in this almost professional manner. But the giant was growing impatient.

"What's the sense of all this blarney parley?" he vociferated, "when the affair's as plain as the nose on your face. He's stuck him, and he's got to swing for it—that's all."

"Not so fast, my friend!"

The ex-barrister was growing blander and blander in measure as the net closed around the victim.

"It is only fair to give him the opportunity of

creating an *alibi*, more especially as the counsel for the defence is awanting. Once again"—and he again gave that circular sweep of his eyes—"has anyone seen this man since he left the Star of Hope in the company of his partner—in the *sole* company of his partner, mind!"

Nobody had seen him.

"I don't care for your *allerbees*—whatever outlandish invention that may be," growled the giant, who had once followed the profession of a butcher, and whose blood-thirstiness was therefore rather more highly developed than that of the average gold-worker. "I say the thing is plain as mud."

"No alibi to be established," noted the barrister, unheeding. "Now, as to the probable motive of the crime:—who is it who would profit by this death!"

"Nobody but himself!" came an answering chorus—whereupon a thin voice above the crowd:

"It's not three months since that Johnnie Cameron told me himself that if he should go off the hooks his Cousin Dick would fall heir to his share of the claim."

"Make way for the witness!" sternly commanded the person who had developed into a mixture of counsel for the prosecution and judge on the bench.

A small, sickly individual was pushed to the front.

"What do you know about this?"

He piped out a story of how when Johnnie was lying very bad with fever in the spring, and quite thought he was going to turn up his toes for good,

he, Samuel Fox, had lent him some of his quinine, and had generally played the sick-nurse, Dick being too clumsy with his hands. On one of these occasions, when his temperature was particularly high, Johnnie had said: "It will be all the better for Dick if I go. I'm only a burden on him as it is, and if he *should* strike gold, there'll be all the more for him and his girl, and he's just wild to make her rich, you know"—or words to that effect.

"I asked him," explained the witness, "whether he had no other heir, and he replied: 'I haven't another soul in the world that belongs to me.'"

"Is that so?" questioned the barrister-judge, turning his eyes upon the accused.

"Yes," said the wretched Dick.

The murmur around him was swelling to a growl.

The case was one exactly calculated to stir the audience. In a community of as mixed elements as these, all straining after one unmixed end—gold, the most scrupulous honesty of dealings becomes almost a condition of existence. It is in the gold-fields only that theft stands for a greater crime than murder. When, then, the murder in itself constitutes a theft, what mercy was to be hoped for from these men, each jealously watchful of his own rights, each trembling for his own share?

As far as stood Dick's present chances of escape, the audience all consisted of "hanging" judges—not so much because he had killed Johnnie, but because

by killing him he had defrauded him of his rightful share of the spoil.

"The motive exists, then," proclaimed the cross-questioner, beginning, in the character of judge, to sum up upon his broken-nailed fingers; "also that the man last seen in the victim's company is the same who would profit by the death. Is that so?"

"It is so!" roared the crowd, swaying ominously forward.

The ex-barrister raised his hand.

"One minute, my friends! Have you anything more to say for yourself?" came the question, still blandly, to the accused.

"Nothing, except that I did not do it."

"Well, we scarcely expected you to say that you had. What is this?"

For at that moment the sickly witness still standing in the clear space around the couple—a space that was rapidly growing smaller—caught his foot—owing to the pressure from behind—in a piece of loose sacking on the floor, jerking it inadvertently to one side.

Instantly someone had pounced forward upon an object thus disclosed to view, and stood up in the same instant with a blood-stained knife in his hand.

"I've seen that knife upon him!" shrieked a half hysterical youth alongside.

"Hand over the *corpus delicti*!" commanded the leader of the proceedings.

He turned it over in his hand, almost knocked

down the while by the men peering over his shoulder. It was a pocket-knife of rather superior make, the largest of whose blades was open, and dark with congealed blood.

"It's his! It's his! There's his mark on the hilt!"

Upon the bone of the shaft, scratched in with some blunt instrument, the letters "R. C." were plainly legible.

The ex-barrister held it towards Dick.

"Is that your knife?" he asked curtly, the blandness abruptly gone from his tone.

Dick took it and stared at it as dully as he had stared at the body on the floor.

"Yes; it's my knife."

"A cord!" roared the giant, looking wildly around him—"a cord to tie his hands with!"

"The knife which you pretended you had left in the saloon?" questioned the barrister; but already he had to raise his voice in order to be heard above the crowd, for the growl had risen to a howl.

Upon Dick's brow there stood a cold sweat. Until now the consciousness of his own innocence had kept him comparatively strong, but he had remembered suddenly that even in regular Courts of Justice innocent men have been ere this condemned.

"I did leave it in the saloon," he stammered, feeling how his knees began to loosen under him. "I know nothing about how it got here. I did not do it, I tell you."

"The circumstantial evidence seems complete. To sum up," began the amateur judge, once more bringing his fingers into play—but the audience had got beyond the stage of "correct" proceedings. There was no question even of the elementary formalities usually observed on these occasions—in so plain a case they would be superfluous. The identification of the knife had extinguished the last doubt, quieted the last thing in the shape of a scruple. A dozen hands were already upon the now desperately struggling Dick—the same hands that had pressed his so warmly last night. Inevitably overpowered, he found himself within the next minute with arms pinioned on his back, in the heart of a howling mob and being hurried over the broken ground towards the nearest group of alder trees—all too far still for the vindictive fury which now possessed every man, young and old, "lettered" or illiterate. At his side, keeping a firm grip of his helpless right arm, strode the ex-butcher, who had constituted himself executioner with as little opposition as the ex-barrister had constituted himself judge.

Within five minutes of the discovery of the knife, poor Johnnie's dead body was lying alone and deserted in the open cabin, with the morning sunshine streaming full upon his upturned face.

CHAPTER III

THE OPAL RING

"WAX-DOLL BELLA" was combing out her silky yellow hair before a dim mirror which hung on the wall of the tiny corrugated iron hut which served her as private residence, when Black Milly, one of her minor rivals, burst excitedly into the room.

"Had the news?" she shrieked, at the top of a shrill voice. "Know what they've done to Johnnie—*your* Johnnie? You'll get no more rings from that quarter, anyway."

"Why?" asked Bella, wheeling round from the mirror.

"Because they've stuck him—that's to say, *he's* stuck him—that big cousin of his. Nicky Bray, going to borrow a kettle from the Camerons, found Johnnie on his back as cold as a stone and with a hole in his chest."

Bella sat down abruptly. She was staggered. To say that she was heart-broken would be overstating the case. To her Johnnie was only one among a host of more or less ardent admirers, though just lately he had happened to stand foremost in her favour.

"And it's the cousin who did it, you say?"

"Well, who else could it have been? Yesterday the gold is found, and to-day one of the partners is cleared away, and the other pockets the whole. Surely that's plain!"

Bella reflected for a minute, her wax-doll cheeks still pale from the fright.

"Yes; that's plain enough," she agreed, with conviction. "What have they done to him?"

"I don't think they've done anything to him *yet*. Had only just found him when I started off here—lying about somewhere upon the hill-side."

"And he was found in his hut? — Johnnie, I mean?"

"Yes; in his hut—all alone."

Bella got up and rapidly twisted her hair into a knot.

"Where are you going to?" asked Black Milly, as she saw her turn swiftly towards the door.

"I'm going to look at him before they put him under the earth," said Bella, and passed out without another word, while her companion, whose nerves were not quite as robust as her own, looked after her with a mixture of scorn and admiration.

Along the rough track which wound like an earth-coloured snake upon the flank of the hill, Bella ran, light-footed. No doubt as to the identity of the murderer had yet crossed her mind. The theory put forward sounded too entirely plausible not to be instantly accepted. It was no curiosity as to

the doer of the deed that was drawing her towards that distant hut, and yet it was curiosity of a morbid sort that was at work. She wanted to see what the face, which had been so close to hers last night across the bar, looked like with life gone from it. At this moment she actually told herself that she would treasure the memory for ever in her heart; for now that Johnnie was dead she almost persuaded herself that she had loved him.

As she approached the claim her pace relaxed. She began to feel a little frightened, though she had seen dead faces ere now. At the thought of the crowd through which she would probably have to force her way, a little paradoxical shyness even stirred in her wax-doll bosom.

But there was no crowd around the cabin—open and deserted it stood upon the bare ground, while over there to the right, a moving mass, whose clamorous voices were growing fainter every instant, were rolling in a compact body towards the distant wood. What there must be in the heart of that compact body Bella easily guessed. Though she was not yet thirty, this was not the first lynching case in her experience, since most of her adolescent years had been spent in the gold-fields.

With a slight shudder she turned and resolutely entered the hut. And now for a space she forgot all about the condemned man, for here before her lay the boy into whose eyes she had so lately gazed, rigidly outstretched, deathly white.

With a little cry, half of horror and half of pity, Bella sank upon her knees. He looked so young, lying there, that a little of that motherliness which slumbers even in depraved hearts was awakened. With a tender gesture she pulled together the blood-stained shirt in order to hide the ugly wound, then stooped to stroke back his hair, and place a kiss upon his forehead — very lightly, because of the repulsive coldness. She wished now that she had come here earlier. He looked so helpless and frail, and those men were so rough.

Then Bella, still stooping over him, began to wonder sentimentally whether the thought of her had been the last in his mind. It ought to have been, with the ring to remind him. And now the ring should be buried with him—she would see to that. It would create a sort of link between them, the thought of which quite pleased her excited fancy.

Instinctively her eyes went to Johnnie's right hand, seeking the ring where she had seen it last : upon the fourth finger. But there was nothing there, and the finger itself presented a strange appearance, for it had blue marks upon it, and appeared unusually lengthened, as though having been half wrenched from its socket.

Bella looked at the left hand—she might have been mistaken ; but no—there was nothing there either. This was strange, certainly.

Sitting back upon her heels, Bella began to reflect.

Why should Dick Cameron have stolen the dead

man's ring? What could he have wanted with it? Sentimental value it had none for him, of that she was somewhat scornfully sure, since upon him too, as upon all new-comers, she had wasted a few smiles; and as for the monetary value it was but small, after all, too small anyway, to tempt a man who had just turned up the promise of millions. And yet it was quite certain that the ring had been taken—violently taken from Johnnie.

Suddenly Bella sat up straight, her eyes fixed now upon the dislocated finger, with a new horror dawning within their shallow blueness. She had remembered that though the ring could have no value for Dick Cameron there yet *was* a man for whom this value existed. It was the man from whose hand she had received it less than a week ago. Light-heartedly, partly because it sat too loosely on her finger, partly because Johnnie's eyes were so very dark and languishing, she had passed it on to her latest admirer. A sordid regard for money-value had never been Bella's especial failing. "Lightly come and lightly gone," ever stood as her motto. Had she been a little more calculating she would surely have hesitated to set one of her adorers against the other by so flagrant an act as had been the transfer of the ring, but her light-hearted optimism had failed to foresee the inevitable consequences. The fact that no one in the camp suspected her conquest of the apparent woman-hater gave her an illogical feeling of security. There would, at least, be no one to

betray her to him, and in the unfriendly isolation in which he lived, the chances of his seeing it upon Johnnie's finger had seemed to her not worth considering.

But yesterday he had seen it. It was this recollection which had come over her now with the force of a revelation. The brief incident in the saloon—unnoticed by all else—stood out again vividly before her alarmed memory. The look which he had given her across the bar—she had read it well, and—yes, there had been things as bad as murder written there. It was that consciousness which had made her whisper to Johnnie in a panic to give her back the ring, but the foolish boy had been too elated to comply. She alone in all the camp had seen the real Kennedy close; and even she had been startled by the glimpses of violence in his nature, and had more than once caught sight of the brute beneath the man. It was because of this violence, even in his love-making, and which ill suited the doll within her, that his homage had always more frightened than flattered her. Though she could not reason it out, her woman's intuition told her that he would be capable even of this.

With her two hands pressed flat to her throbbing temples, she tried to think out the matter.

This lad before her had been murdered because of the ring—this much stood already firm within her mind, and there was only one man to whom the ring was worth bloodshed. And in this very moment,

while the conclusion took shape in her mind, Dick Cameron was being dragged towards the alder trees—had perhaps reached them already.

Horror-stricken she had sprung to her feet; and without another look at the dead boy, without another thought but that of saving the innocent man from his horrible fate, she was speeding over the uneven ground, in the direction in which she had seen the mob disappear.

An elementary, but not the less sincere sting of remorse, chased her as though with whips over the stones which bruised her feet without her feeling it, past the thorn-bushes which caught her skirts without her taking time to free the frail texture. She knew herself now to be the cause of the crime, and everything within her that could stand for a conscience cried out against being the cause of yet another crime. It was a popular saying that Wax-doll Bella always looked as though she had come straight out of a box; but if she at all recalled a doll just now, it could only have been one that has been sadly knocked about.

As she topped the last wave of ground which separated her from the wilderness of alders and willows, a cry escaped her lips.

The crowd she had lately seen so compact and close was now broken up into groups, all streaming away in one direction, their backs to the wood, their faces to the river. A few minutes ago there had come a shrill whistle from somewhere up-stream,

but Bella's breath had been too loud in her own ears to let her hear it.

She paused for a moment, her hands clasped over her hammering heart, her horrified eyes upon the dispersing crowd. Could this mean that the deed was done already?

CHAPTER IV

JOB DOW

UPON the long grass that rioted among the shoots of the rioting willows, Bella was once more upon her knees, bending breathless over what, to all appearances, was a lifeless body. When with her own hand she had cut it down, not ten minutes ago, it had been more from the mere horror of seeing it there than because of any coherent thought of rescue in her mind. It was only as she touched him that hope came to her. He was so utterly different in contact to poor Johnnie over there that she could not believe him dead. She had heard of suicides who had chosen this horrible mode of death being rescued after life was apparently extinct; and she dimly guessed that, under the influence of some rival attraction, the execution had been bungled over. When, a little later, she heard of the arrival of the steamer, whose shrill whistle had been laden, for one man at least, with consequences unguessed at, Bella understood more easily. Considering the eventfulness of a "boat-day," the stampede to the landing-stage was a foregone conclusion; for in every crowd, even of grown-up men, there is

always an element of the baby. Mankind *en masse* seems ever to revert to mankind in petticoats.

She did not know for how long she had been feverishly chafing his hands, rubbing his chest—doing everything that her limited knowledge suggested—when her ear against his side was able to discern the beating of his heart.

“Brandy! Brandy! If only I had brandy!” she kept saying to herself in senseless repetition, thinking, with impatient yearning, of the many unattainable bottles ranged on the shelves of the Star of Hope.

Presently, at a sound, she turned her head.

Were the executioners returning to make sure of their work?

No; they were sure of it already, it would seem.

Bending aside the twigs of the willow-bush behind which she knelt, she had caught sight of an individual whom she knew well as, taken all round, the most fervent *habitué* of the saloon. It was Job Dow, a small, spare old man, with a long and unpleasantly skinny neck, on the top of which sat a very small face, which apparently was too large still for his taste, since he seemed bent upon reducing it yet further by pursing up his chin as high as it would go, and pulling his tattered hat on to his brow in such a fashion that under its shadow a mere fragment of a physiognomy remained visible. He was advancing slowly and unsteadily, dragging behind him a small hand-cart, upon which lay something covered with a piece of sacking.

Along Bella's back there ran a shiver—she knew what that something was; for Job Dow had long held the office of gravedigger to the community at large, the only one for which this weak-minded creature, whom drink was sinking ever nearer to the level of an idiot, had been pronounced fit.

Bella understood at once: he was bringing along the remains of the murdered man, in order to bury them alongside of those of his murderer, in this very wood which served not only as hall of execution, but likewise as cemetery to the settlement.

The sight of Job Dow awoke in Bella both a hope and a fear.

"He will have brandy!" had been her first thought, "he is never without it!" But immediately had followed the fear of betrayal. Without having yet formed any definite plan of action, she felt only that until she could see her way clearly, any sort of confidant might be dangerous.

She became aware that Job Dow, standing still under the first alder tree, was staring upwards with his bleary eyes from under his hat-rim, as though in search of something upon the branches.

Quickly making up her mind, she rose and went towards him.

"Mornin', Job!" she greeted him in her very best Star of Hope manner. "At work already, I see. A busy day for a man of your profession, isn't it?"

"Means two dollas, anyway," remarked Job, giving an uncertain touch to his hat, for Wax-doll Bella,

even when not behind the bar, stood in his mind for the dispenser of all earthly felicity. "I've got one o' them here all right; but happen you can tell me, Miss Beller" (he was the only man in the camp who gave her the "Miss") "where they've put t'other 'un? I wuz told az how I should find him upon one o' them trees; but devil a copse can I make out anywhere round. Happen az my eyes are a bit below par thish mornin'."

"He's drunker than usual," noted Bella; for the traces of yesterday's carouse, whose opportunities had been generously made use of by Job, were plainly visible both in gait and eye; and, sure enough, there was the nose of the inevitable bottle poking out of his capacious pocket.

"Oh, he's all right, never fear!" she reassured him in that same tone of artificial flippancy which she had adopted as the most serviceable for the occasion. "Somebody has saved you the trouble of taking him down, that's all. He's over there behind the willows. Time enough to fetch him when you've done your work. You've got your spade, I see; but aren't you too boozled to hold it? Job, Job, you're a bad dog, I fear!" and she playfully shook a pink finger at him.

Job straightened himself, with an attempt at professional dignity.

"In course I'm able to hould it, Miss Beller! Be I ever so full, I never yet bungled a grave. Show me the place, and I'll show you how straight I can stick the spade into the ground."

"Come along, then."

And Bella swiftly led the way in a direction from which there was no danger of Job catching sight of that which lay behind the willow-bush.

"What do you say to this?" she asked, standing still and indicating a clear stretch of turf between the alders.

"Ver' good—ver' good!" quavered Job, eyeing it from under his hat-brim with an approving eye. "Ye'll see fer yourself what a couple o' grand graves I'll turn out here!"

"But not with that bottle in your pocket!" laughed Bella, and with a quick gesture she whipped it out.

"No, no, Job!" She was holding it behind her back now and resolutely shaking her head. "You shall get it when you've done your work; but if I leave it to you now you'll be requiring too much refreshment—I know you—and those two poor wretches won't get to rest to-day."

"But you'll give it me when I've done, Miss Beller?" abjectly pleaded Job.

"Honour bright! And now, go ahead! I shall take a walk meanwhile in the wood to see if there are any daisies remaining—it's only Christian-like, you know, to put a handful of flowers on the top of a new grave-hill, and if both the holes are ready when I come back, you shall have your bottle."

"You're an angel, Miss Beller!" hiccupped Job, as he bent to his task.

With the bottle tightly clutched Bella sped back to the willow-bush. No change had come there during the few minutes of her absence. But though he was not visibly alive, Dick Cameron was undoubtedly not dead; of this she began to feel more and more certain as the minutes passed. The brandy poured between his lips soon began to do its work. A faint flutter of the eyelids, followed by a slight convulsion passing over the inert body, were the first signs of painfully and laboriously returning life. As she became aware of it, it was all that Bella could do to repress a shout of triumph.

An hour later she still knelt beside him, gazing eagerly into his expressionless eyes. Full consciousness was not yet returned, but all doubts as to the possibility of restoring him were at an end.

During that hour, while Job, over there, bent over his spade, Bella's plan had matured. Up to the moment of securing the brandy-bottle she had acted on mere impulse, without any coherent thought of what was to follow. It was the peculiar circumstances of the case which had hatched in her brain an idea as cunning as it was daring. At this moment Dick Cameron was dead to the world; it would be safer to let him remain dead—even to John Dow—and she thought she knew how she could do it.

From between the willow branches she had kept a watchful eye upon the gravedigger, so that the right moment for interference could not escape her.

Job had been as good as his word—in fact, rather better; for when presently Bella reappeared upon the scene he had not only finished the two “holes,” he had also put Johnnie into his own private hole, and heaped the earth upon him into a rough mound. In his turbid brain he discovered the fact that this would be a surprise for “Miss Beller,” and calculated to restore the precious bottle all the more rapidly to his own pocket.

And, sure enough, here she came along, all smiles and fair glances.

“I’ve done it, ain’t I?” panted Job, who by this time was both desperately and legitimately thirsty.

“Yes, you’ve done it—and since I always keep my promises, here goes!”

“And how about t’other ‘un?” asked Job, but not until he had taken a long, ecstatic pull at the black funnel.

“There’s no hurry about him, is there? You’ve earned a rest first, strikes me.”

“Strikes me as I have!” murmured Job, already sitting upon the mound he had just constructed.

It was not many minutes later that he had rolled off it into the grass, and Bella knew that the first move in the game had been successfully made.

The second move was that she plunged into the willow thicket, presently to return, her arms laden with branches, which she threw into the empty grave. Then, lifting Job’s spade from the ground

beside him she set about filling back the earth into the hole with a vigour of which her shapely arms scarcely appeared capable.

When two hours later Job awoke, it was to purse up his chin higher than ever, and rub his eyes perplexedly. If he remembered right—though his memory didn't seem quite in working order to-day—there had been one grave-hill here when he went to sleep, while now there undoubtedly were two—and one quite as neatly heaped as the other, and with daises strewn impartially upon both. How did this come?

Counsel, of course, was sought where Job always sought it, and apparently also was found.

"Not that I *r'lect* puttin' the second 'un in," he soliloquised, with the bottle's mouth against his own; "but it's plain I did it, since there it is! I'll ask Miss Beller; she's bound to know all about it. Happen she was right when she said az how I was a bit boozled this mornin'."

That afternoon there came a knock at Bella's door. She opened in person.

"Plaze, Miss Beller," began Job, squinting up at her rather sheepishly from under his hat-brim, for the question was a delicate one, "happen az how you can tell me about the other grave-'ill—the second 'un, I mean?"

"What about it?" asked Bella, unmoved.

"It's a fact that I can't *r'lect* makin' it up; yet I s'pose it can only have been I az did it?"

"Who else should it have been? Why, I saw you at work."

"And you saw me put in the second 'un? It's a fact that I've only got the r'lection of the first 'un."

"Yes; I saw you."

"With your own eyes?"

"With my own eyes," said Bella unwaveringly.

"That's all right, then," breathed Job, with a sigh of sincere relief. "Then I s'pose az how I can go and fetch my two dollars with a clare conshuns, can't I? Yer see, Miss Beller, I'm kind o' responsible to the commoonity for the cospes, ain't I? and it 'ud be mighty arkard fur me if one o' them had gone astray."

"You can fetch your dollars with a perfectly clear conscience. You've done your duty, I tell you. Really, Job," and she laughed a trifle hysterically, "I've heard of people in your condition seeing double, but you're the first case I've come across of seeing only half of what there is to see."

"Well, well, I'm not for disputin' as how I'm a bit muddled to-day," murmured Job, as, with his chin in the air and his face reduced to a scrap, he tramped off to claim his wages from the person who acted as cashier of the public funds.

A two-dollar day was a somewhat rare occurrence, and it was quite a pleasant discovery to find that they had been so easily earned.

"Happen as how I kind o' did it in my sleep," was the conclusion in which he rested content.

CHAPTER V

IN THE TIN HUT

THAT night the presiding goddess of the Star of Hope made so late an appearance at her post as to call for a severe reprimand from the proprietor of the saloon.

"Call these business hours?" he greeted her with a *sotto-voce* snarl, when somewhere about 1 a.m. she took up her place behind the bar. "And on a boat-day too, with our hands as full as they'll hold! Need as much beauty-sleep as all that, eh?"

"And if I did?" said Bella, her unabashed blue eyes full upon his fat face; whereupon the proprietor grunted and held his peace, as irritably aware of her market-value as was Wax-doll Bella herself.

But she did not look as though she had been asleep. Never had the pink in her cheeks approached so nearly to pure carmine, and never had her round, shining eyes appeared more wide-awake, nor moved more rapidly round the room. Within five minutes of her entrance she had taken complete stock of the company, and had ascertained that Kennedy's dark physiognomy was not among the many faces that lined the walls and pressed around the tables.

It was agreed on all hands that never had Wax-doll Bella been in such "good form" as during the two or three hours that followed. If the excitement under whose influence the customary primness of her demeanour melted like snow in the sunshine bore any relation to hysteria, it remained unguessed at by her audience. She talked, she laughed, she danced, she even sang, as the astonished proprietor and the delighted guests had never heard or seen her do. One and all were as pleasantly taken aback as might be a child who unexpectedly discovers that its plaything has got in in a hitherto unexpected clockwork, producing both movement and sound.

And yet, when in the early morning hours the chief barmaid closed the door of the saloon behind her, it was all she could do not to lie straight down upon the bare ground, from sheer, overpowering fatigue.

What a day it had been! The most closely packed both with mental emotions and physical labour in all her chequered existence.

The filling in of the sham grave had been the least part of it. But oh, the work of getting the only half-recovered man more effectively hidden than he could be behind the frail screen of the willow-bush! To walk he was far too weak, and she not strong enough to carry him. A slow and halting crawl was all he could achieve; and in this fashion it was that, not having yet recovered a complete grasp of events, yet docile as a child to

her peremptory orders, he had gained the heart of the willow-thicket, where he was to lie concealed until such time as it would appear safe to convey him to her own hut.

There she had left him, half prepared on her return to find that he had either been discovered, or had succumbed to sheer weakness.

But Fortune was with her to-day. Not only did the immortal interests of a "boat-day" keep the community most happily occupied, but when, with a beating heart and a basket of refreshments, she again reached the spot, Cameron had so far revived that he was able to eat.

Then, when darkness had fallen, and the moment seemed propitious, had come the hardest work of the day ; for by the roundabout way perforce chosen, it was close upon a three-mile walk to her hut ; and Cameron, even under the influence of repeated doses of brandy, could not walk more than fifty paces without sitting down to rest ; and even this he only achieved by leaning heavily upon her aching shoulder. And with every step the terror of a chance meeting,—the constant expectation of a final breakdown. Twice he fainted straight away, almost dragging her down in his fall, and at least fifty times Bella gave up the cause as lost.

When at length she stood at her own door, with Cameron's hand still clutching her shoulder, the thing seemed too unreal to be true. Even among the houses they had met but a few stragglers, all

hurrying towards the flaring saloon, and too pre-occupied with its promises to throw more than a passing glance at the dimly seen couple.

She had scarcely got him on to the top of her own bed when once more he swooned away ; but the worst of her terrors were at an end. She waited only to see that the brandy put between his lips was swallowed, before, having with deft fingers rearranged her attire, and with the key of the little tin cabin safely in her pocket, she turned her face towards the Star of Hope.

When the key again grated in the lock she was too tired almost to wonder what her patient would be doing. Having carefully fastened the door behind her, she went slowly to the bed. His eyes were closed, and his face of a startling pallor, to which the light filtering through the closely-drawn baize curtain of the little window gave a greenish tint. About his throat, too, exposed by the open shirt, there were some hideously suggestive marks : but the rise and fall of his chest said enough. He was in a deep sleep.

Almost indifferently Bella turned from him, and, going into the tiny kitchen alongside, threw herself down upon a piece of carpet, and with another piece rolled up under her head, almost instantaneously fell into oblivion.

When she awoke the sun stood high already. With physical refreshment mental anxiety had returned. Springing up, she hastened into the adjoining room.

Cameron lay almost as she had left him ; but as she stooped over him, his eyes—no longer the dazed eyes of yesterday—opened full to meet hers.

Feebly he put out one hand towards hers.

"Bella—I haven't thanked you. Yesterday I didn't seem to understand, but to-day I do. I never knew you were so good!"

The hoarse whisper was plain enough.

Bella snatched back her hand.

"I am not good at all!" she said, almost sharply.

"I *had* to do it—that is all."

He looked at her with a little painful surprise upon his colourless face.

"You *have* done it, at any rate. And I must tell you this too: it is the life of an innocent man you have saved. Upon my soul and honour, Bella—and I speak as one coming back from the dead—I did not do it!"

"I knew you did not do it," said Bella, as sharply as before, and turning away to busy herself with the cups upon the table.

"You knew it? You knew that it was not a murderer whom you were cutting down?"

"If I had thought it was you who put the knife into Johnnie," said Bella, between her teeth, "then I should have let you hang."

"But, Bella"—he raised himself laboriously upon his elbow—"if you are so sure of that, then perhaps you know who it was who did it?—and if so, you could clear me?"

"I know nothing at all," said Bella sullenly, ready to bite her tongue out. "I only know that you and Johnnie were more like brothers than cousins, and though you've never been over-civil to me, I can't say I've yet deciphered the mark of Cain upon you."

"Ah, yes; poor Johnnie!"

Dick sank back upon the pillow.

"I don't know how I shall do without him. And you too, Bella—it must have been a shock to you. He had nothing but you in his head, poor boy! Even that last night on the way home he spoke only of your hair and eyes."

"Did he indeed?" asked Bella, irresistibly flattered. Then, after a pause: "And the ring—the one I gave him with the opal, he—he liked it, didn't he? He didn't ever take it off?"

The question was put with a purpose. She wanted to know whether, by any chance, Dick too had been aware of the disappearance of the ring.

"Never! I believe he would have died sooner than part with it."

"That's about what he did!" reflected Bella bitterly, and yet relieved. Obviously Dick had no suspicion; it was better so. Yesterday her first impulse had been to denounce Kennedy;—to-day, believing Dick safe, she shrank from the step. She had not seen her dark-faced wooer since the crime, nor had she tried to see him; the thought of a meeting filled her with horror; but to speak would

mean his death, and she had had enough of death—for the present, anyway.

There was a pause, during which she put the kettle on to the fire, for tea had obviously become the first necessity.

"I wonder who it could have been?" commented Dick, addressing the ceiling. "Such a good-natured chap as Johnnie was, too. I shouldn't have thought there was a man in the camp who had a grudge against him. It's what people call a 'dark affair,' isn't it?"

"It was as clear as day to the people who took you to the alder wood; and it would seem as clear as day to any court of justice you took it to. Have you forgotten about the knife?"

"That knife beats me. I can swear that I left it at the saloon."

"I believe you; but nobody else will."

"Does that mean that I shall have to remain dead—for the present?"

"It is your only chance of remaining alive."

Dick laughed feebly. "But how is it to be done?"

"By lying low here until you are able to travel. You'll have to walk to the next boat-station. It wouldn't be safe to embark here, even disguised."

"I haven't got a disguise."

"I'll procure you one."

"And I've got no money, either."

"I'll lend you money."

"You're a stunner!" murmured Dick, overwhelmed with so much generosity.

"You'd better not be as grateful as all that," said Bella, with a sharp laugh. "Your wife mightn't like it."

"My wife!" Dick started up with a new terror upon his face. "She will hear of this, perhaps—she will think I am dead. It will kill her, Bella, I tell you! I shall send her a wire from the first station I come to."

"You will do nothing of the sort!" said Bella, turning upon him. "Remember that to the world you are dead, and telegraph clerks are human, after all."

"She is very keen to keep me dead," was Dick's passing reflection, as once more he sank against the pillow.

CHAPTER VI

"MR. BROWN"

IN a tiny compartment of one of those human beehives in which hundreds of existences wear themselves out, side by side, without more knowledge of each other than the staircase affords, Elvira Cameron sat alone, fighting with despair.

At first sight it would indeed appear as though she had a companion. Over there, in the corner, there stood a form, which in the falling dusk could well be taken for another woman, though a closer look gave the gruesome impression that she had been recently decapitated. But, despite her faultless bust and haunches, she was only a wickerwork woman, stiffly wearing the last garment upon which Elvira's needle had been busy. In another corner stood the sewing machine—idle likewise, and not even protected from the dust that lay thick upon the half-finished blouses and skirts littering the table and even the floor.

As she sat thus in a shabby rocking-chair, whose motion soothed her unrest, wrapped in a shabbier dressing-gown, Elvira was principally surprised at one thing: to find herself still alive, and apparently

in her right senses. During the two days of high fever that were past, the end had seemed so comfortingly near : and yet here she sat, her wide eyes fixed upon the bare wall opposite, her mind trying to gauge the height and the depth of the ruin that had come upon her.

Even thus, with no advantages of attire to frame her beauty, with her undressed hair hanging loose about her shoulders, she was a woman to kneel down and worship.

It was difficult to range her as a type : for while the intense darkness of hair and eyes spoke of a Southern origin, there was about her complexion that peculiar delicacy of grain, and even in this moment of physical exhaustion, that bloom which is characteristic of the North. Never had the mixture of races—for her Californian mother had been of Spanish descent, her father a pure blood Yankee—brought about a more fortunate result, physically, and a more curious one morally. Andalusian heat and American coolness had rarely been mixed with such bewildering results.

The passion with which she had responded to the handsome young Scotchman's passionate wooing had left her no time to think of the future. It was only when the first rapture was spent that the American side of her nature came sufficiently to the fore to let her acquiesce in the inevitable separation. It would not be for long—it could not be for long—so her twenty-year-old heart had

argued; and to-day, as she sat in the old rocking-chair, she was trying to understand that it was to be for ever!

With a shiver she stretched out her hand towards a crumpled sheet of newspaper upon the table. The date was of more than three weeks back, and yet it was only two days ago that it had come into her hands; and the way it had come was in itself a history.

In the voluntary isolation in which, for prudence sake, she lived, she had exchanged words with only one of her fellow-lodgers. This exception was her immediate neighbour, whose door opened opposite hers straight across this last landing—an old, lame individual, whom she had passed by at least a hundred times on the staircase before an acquaintance was begun. Nor would it ever have been begun but for a chance discovery.

She had begun by noticing him for his peculiar appearance; for this strange person had about him all the characteristics of a dwarf: the large head, the high shoulders, the big extremities, the ungainly features—and yet he was of quite an average height. “A dwarf looked at through a magnifying-glass,” was the definition Elvira arrived at.

By degrees she noticed him also for his loneliness. Like herself he seemed cut off from his surroundings, like herself he never received a visitor nor appeared to have a friend. His occupations seemed doubtful and various. Once, after a heavy snowfall, she

recognised him among the workmen on the pavement ; another time she caught sight of his grotesque face in a procession of sandwich-men, above the flaring praises of the latest thing in infants' food. It was generally after dark, when bringing back fresh orders from the big shop for which she worked, that these staircase meetings took place ; but one day, being short of thread, and forced into a midday excursion, she came upon him in full daylight, and as he stood humbly aside to make way, she felt struck by something new and poignant in his horribly gaunt face.

She puzzled over it, vaguely haunted ; and when several days passed without another meeting, her generous young heart began to feel uneasy.

One evening, coming home with her supper in her hand—a few pieces of cold meat wrapped in paper, and a fresh roll bought at the baker opposite—she stopped to listen before her neighbour's door, for the sound of a dull moan came from behind it. Timidly she knocked. The sound broke off, but there was no invitation to enter.

She knocked again, and then, despite the silence, entered boldly.

In the precarious light of the street-lamp, she caught sight of the old man cowered together upon a bed that was bare of everything but a straw mattress. A table with an empty plate upon it, a rush-bottomed chair badly frayed, and an outlandish-looking trunk in the corner, formed the rest of the appointments of the attic.

From out of his horribly contracted face his small eyes looked at her dully.

"You are ill?" asked Elvira, approaching the bed with some nervousness.

He shook his large head.

"But you must be in pain—I heard you groaning."

He said nothing, though she noticed a convulsive movement of the lips.

Suddenly she became aware that something had leaped into his eyes. They had left her face, and were fastened upon her hands with an almost savage fixity.

Then in a moment she understood, for it was the roll in her hand he was glaring at with eyes become like those of an animal, while his very nostrils widened as though to drink in the perfume of its freshness.

"You are *hungry*?" she cried, as she held the roll towards him.

He seized it, and tried to put his teeth into it, but failed, falling back again with a groan.

Elvira flew across to her own attic.

She had remembered that she still possessed half a bottle of wine, treasured for the days of extra work.

Gradually he revived; and as she watched him slowly eat, a feeling of intolerable pity came over her. The thought that a fellow-creature had so nearly perished so close to her, for want of a bit of bread, was to her warm heart a bitter reproach. She blamed herself for not having understood sooner.

Her own contact with misery was close enough by this time to have opened her eyes,—so much closer than Dick had any idea of!—Dick, who had left her in a two-roomed apartment, and would find her again in this hive, with a street-sweeper for neighbour!

Gradually as he ate the glare left his eyes, and something awestruck came into them. He gazed at the small, slender figure beside his bed as though at an apparition.

"Ye're not the Blaissed Vairgin, are ye?" he whispered at last, and from the words as well as the accent Elvira knew him to be an Irishman.

"I'm Mrs. Cameron, your neighbour."

"Are ye, indade? Well, ye're the first o' them."

"The first of whom?"

"The first of the women that haven't run away from me. They don't find me ower pretty, the ladies."

The faint gleam in the corners of his small eyes made him still more unmistakably Irish.

This was the beginning of the friendship between the young grass-widow and the lame Irishman: Poorly furnished though her own larder was, there was henceforward no danger of starvation for "Mr. Brown," the strangely unceltic but non-committal name under which he had introduced himself to his benefactress, for Elvira had that "sympathy of experience" which only the poor can feel for the poor. His grey hairs, his loneliness, his very

ugliness, they all appealed to her pity. And he accepted her small bounties as much as a matter of course as though they had come straight from the hand of that "Blaissed Vairgin" to whom he had begun by likening her.

His gratitude took various practical shapes, such as the humble request for permission to blacken her boots, or oil her machine. The only time that he attempted to put it into words the effect was rather startling.

"If at any toime ye should want any leetle thing done for you, Missy"—he observed on this occasion—"sich as knockin' dhown a fellow, for instance, don't ye be for forgettin' that I'm the man for ye."

And he opened and closed his large hands expressively.

"But I don't want anyone knocked down, Mr. Brown."

"I'm only mentionin' it, in case. Knocked down, mbind you, and sthrangled too, if nades be."

Elvira laughed like a child, for in spite of the hard tussle with Life, she was not much more than a child.

"Goodness, Mr. Brown, don't you know that it's wrong to strangle people?"

"Roight and wrong are a matter of opeenion," said Mr. Brown sententiously. "You can take my word for it, Missy, for I'm a man of experiance."

If seeing the world constituted experience, Mr.

Brown could not be said to lack it. He seemed to be personally acquainted, not only with every continent, but likewise with every country therein. It was scarcely possible to name a town without some casual remark betraying that, at some moment of his wandering existence, he had been there; but as to what his occupations had been under these different hemispheres, Elvira found him persistently reticent.

It was not in her own attic, it was in that of her queer neighbour, that the blow fell which she believed to be her death-blow.

Newspapers did not, as a rule, exist for her; she was too busy by day, too tired at night, to care for either politics or scandal.

On this evening she had brought back a sausage for supper—a sausage which she meant to divide with her *protégé* across the landing.

"Mr. Brown," she gaily announced, entering the tiny space with the parcel in her hand, "give me your knife! I am going to divide this fairly between us."

In the very act of unwrapping the sausage from the half-sheet of newspaper in which it was packed, she became silent. Her eye had been caught by her own name in print.

"A Cameron murdered—a Cameron murderer"—ran the heading. "Lynching case in the gold-fields."

She had read to the end of the paragraph, which, in stilted phrases, recorded the story of Johnnie and

Dick, such as it was known to newspaper reporters, before it even dawned upon her that it could in any way concern herself. Cameron was, after all, not a very uncommon name. Strange that one of them should have been called Johnnie, and the other—but no, it *could* not be. That such a monstrosity should happen to Dick and herself seemed so unthinkable that she almost smiled. It was only with a second reading that the possibility of the thing came over her with an icy rush.

An attack of sudden faintness forced her to sit down upon the one chair in the room, turning the while so frightfully pale that Mr. Brown started forward as though to save her from falling. She tried to speak, but, not succeeding, pushed the paper into his hand, pointing dumbly to the paragraph. While he read she watched him breathlessly: she wanted to see whether a second human brain could form the same horrible thought which had begun to shape itself in hers, for Mr. Brown had been made acquainted with the chief facts of her life.

It was clear that it could; for, having read to the end, he shot a bewildered glance at her face, and she could see how his large hand began to tremble.

Suddenly a sort of fury came over her.

"It is not true! It is not true!" she cried, rising passionately to her feet. "He did not do it—Dick never hurt a fly. But they can't have killed him, I don't believe it. No, no; it isn't possible! Such things don't happen, do they?— You must know."

He rubbed his stubbly chin, his eyes glued to the paper. To a man of his "exparience" it was known that almost anything can happen in a gold-field. He looked at the date—it was of three weeks back. Just as little as she had he kept abreast of the news.

"Maybe it's a pack o' lies!" he said at last vehemently. "Oi'll go out and inquire. And meanwhile, Missy, thry and kape your senses thegither."

When, an hour later, he limped up to her door, it was opened in his face.

"Quick!" she panted, with madness in her eyes. "Tell me quickly!"

But instead of telling her, he knelt down before her and clasped his hands as though in prayer.

"By the Holy Vaargin," he said in a whisper that shook, "kape your senses thegither!"

"It is true, then?"

He buried his big face in his enormous hands, without speaking.

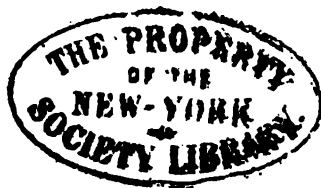
After that she had had no coherent thought for two dreadful nights and days, during which a horrible phantom danced and dangled before her eyes, and while the Irishman watched like a dog on the threshold, for fear that any of her raving words should meet uncalled-for ears; for in the human bee-hive no one but himself had got the clue to her identity, nor did he mean that they should get it.

To-day, exhaustion having brought a little calm,

he had retired from his post—while in the dark Elvira sat alone, looking at her lost happiness, through the first tears that she had been able to shed.

Three weeks ago! Why, the grass on those two lonely graves, so graphically described by the newspaper reporter, must be green already!

She dashed her hand across her eyes, and managed to say "Come in!" for there had been a knock, a very low knock, at her door. Her watch-dog back again, no doubt, though she had not heard his door open.



CHAPTER VII

THE QUICK AND THE DEAD

THE door opened and closed again behind her.

"Well?" she said wearily, without turning her head.

Silence for a moment ; then, in a hoarse whisper, she heard her name spoken.

"Elvira !"

With a start, she faced round. A man stood before her—a stranger with a black beard and the collar of his overcoat turned up to his ears, though the evening was mild.

"You have mistaken the door," she began haughtily ; and in that moment the stranger put up his hand to his face, and before her incredulous eyes the black beard dropped to the ground ; and through the veil of the falling dusk, she found herself looking into a face which could only be that of a spectre—a face which she had been thinking of as having lain under the earth for three weeks.

To her overwrought nerves the shock was too great. Cowering away from him, with one scream of terror, she fell back swooning in her chair.

"Elvira! Elvira! My love! It is I! Oh, blockhead—I have killed her!"

He was on his knees, covering her cold hands with kisses, when the door burst open and there entered precipitately one of the most fantastically ugly old men he had ever seen, whose big head was shaking with indignation between his high shoulders, and whose huge hands opened and closed ominously.

"Hands off!" hissed this alarming individual, as he threateningly limped forward. "How dare ye touch Missy? Lord above, how did ye get in here, altogether? Sames as tho' I'd been dozin' a bit!"

"I'm not hurting her—I'm her husband," groaned Dick. "Oh, help me to bring her round! I'm her husband, man!"

"It's a loier that ye are! Her husband is dhead, I tell ye. Hands off, I say!"

"To be sure—I am dead—I had forgotten," stammered Dick, losing his head by another degree. "But I'm her husband all the same. There—she's coming round—she'll tell you so herself. Elvira, my love, it is I—it is Dick. Don't look at me like that! I'm alive, I tell you; feel me, kiss me—I'm alive!"

Slowly the panic in her eyes turned to an incredulous rapture. It wanted but the warm touch of his lips upon hers to perfect the conviction.

"Dick!" she murmured, as with a deep, deep breath her head sank upon his breast.

Mr. Brown, having for a minute stood rigid and quite unattended to, limped out again, rubbing his chin very hard ; and for the rest of the evening kept watch in the passage. He was not quite as surprised as a man of less varied experience might have been, but, all the same, he was considerably perplexed ; and had reached the conclusion that, until matters were cleared up a bit, there was no need for the rest of the lodging-house being taken into Missy's confidence.

Hours later husband and wife were still looking into each other's eyes, still going over each detail of the last month's incredible history.

At the first mention of a "woman-saviour" a cloud had ruffled Elvira's brow : a cloud quickly smoothed away.

"As though that doll could ever have a chance beside your memory, my queen!" he laughed exultingly. "Why, before the fire of your eyes she would melt as though in truth she were nothing but wax. Toys of that sort are all very well for boys like poor Johnnie."

"And Johnnie cared for her?"

"He had lost his head over her, at any rate."

"Poor Johnnie! It is only now that I am able to feel sorry for him. Have you formed any guess as to the murderer?"

"None whatever. He had no enemy that I know of."

"But he might have had a rival, might he not?"

"In Bella's affections, you mean? Oh, for the matter of that, about three quarters of the camp were his rivals. But they don't kill each other for that sort of thing: it isn't taken seriously enough."

"Did she care for Johnnie?"

"Well, she did seem rather taken with him. Two days before the catastrophe she made him a present of quite a handsome ring."

"A ring?"

There was a new note of interest in Elvira's voice. A ring rarely fails to appeal to the female imagination.

"That looks as though she took it rather seriously. It is strange, certainly, that even caring for him a little she should have tried so hard to save his murderer."

"I am no murderer to her. She told me that she knew I had not done it."

"Ah? Does that mean that she knows who did do it?"

"That was my own question; but she absolutely denied knowing."

Elvira did not seem to hear. She sat lost in thought.

"Why did she work so hard—why did she plan so cleverly to save you?"

"She said she could not help it; it *had* to be done—those were her words."

Elvira got up, almost pushing him from her.

"That girl knows!" she said decisively. "I will stake my soul that that girl knows—and she is trying to shield the real criminal. She did not want to see an innocent man punished, but she does not want to see the guilty one punished either, because she feels that the guilt is really hers. She can't be quite bad."

"But she said most emphatically that she did not know."

Elvira laughed aloud, shaking back the dark masses of her hair.

"Oh, you men! Why, that is exactly the reason why I feel sure that she does know. It is quite simple."

She stood before him with delicate brows knit in collected and business-like thought.

"This thing, on the face, looks like a money-murder; but *we* know that it isn't that. What remains? A love-murder, of course—there never are any but those two motives. That wax-doll creature is the woman, of course; our device has to be: *Cherchez l'homme!* Now think, Dick; think hard! There must be some clue lying about."

"She certainly was very keen about keeping me dark!" said Dick slowly, his unwieldy masculine mind struggling to turn new lights upon the past.

"What else did she say besides that about having to do it?"

Dick plunged into his memory. "Well, she asked me about the ring."

Elvira's frown of attention deepened. That ring again! "What did she ask?"

"Whether Johnnie ever took it off. I told her he never did."

"Then I suppose he had the ring on when he was murdered? Was it a valuable ring?"

"More curious than valuable, I think. A funny, square opal with blue stones round it. A sort of antiquarian business, with a crest and motto engraved on the inside."

"Not *her* crest and motto, of course?"

"Of course not. A present she got, no doubt."

"Do you remember what they were?"

"Yes—they struck me as curious: an eagle's claw clutching a dagger, and the motto: 'Gae ye claw me, I'll claw ye.'"

"'Gae' is Scotch, surely?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Were there many Scotchmen in the camp?"

"Quantities."

"There are two things I should like to know," said Elvira, after a pause—"one is, to which Scotch family that motto belongs; and the other is, whether Johnnie had that ring on his finger when he was buried."

Dick smiled indulgently.

"That ring has run away with your fancy, Elvira! I can't think what has made you fasten on it."

"I can't say either, but it pursues me. You're quite sure you never saw it before you saw it on Johnnie?"

"Well, the funny thing is that I'm not sure about that. Even when Johnnie showed it me it somehow seemed familiar."

"Oh, Dick—try and think!"

"It's no use—I've tried to. All I feel sure of is that it wasn't on a finger. I've got a kind of photograph of it in my mind dangling from a watch-chain — but *whose* watch-chain the deuce alone knows."

"If you could remember, it might settle the matter with one blow."

"Which matter?"

"But the matter of proving your innocence, Dick! You don't suppose, do you, that I am going to sit still till that is done!"

She stood before him, her eyes flooded with light, her cheeks with colour, her small figure gaining the illusion of height from the determination of her look.

"What are you going to do?" asked Dick, gazing up at her in a trance of admiration.

"I am going to make that girl speak. I start for the gold-fields to-morrow."

"Nonsense!" he said, almost angrily. "And besides, you will never make her speak. Her last words to me were: 'Mind, it is not I that will clear you!'"

"I shall pay her—I shall have money now. Have you forgotten about the gold-find? It is mine now, since before the law you are dead. I shall sell it, of course, and we shall be rich."

It was the cool business tone again. She was her father's daughter all over.

Dick had almost forgotten about the gold—but it did not silence him. Even the proof of his innocence did not seem worth the price.

He would have done better to yield at once, as no doubt he would have done had he better known the woman he had married. Silenced by her arguments, swept off his feet by her ardour, he had from the first no chance against her.

It was midnight before, grudgingly, he had consented to remain hidden in New York, awaiting results.

"But not in this house," she decided. "Mr. Brown will find you a safe place."

"Is Mr. Brown the old man who attacked me to-night?"

"Yes."

"I am afraid I betrayed myself before him."

"That can't matter. Mr. Brown would much rather be cut into little pieces than do anything I don't want him to do. He will be as dumb as a fish, until—oh, Dick, how long will it take, I wonder? Just see if I don't succeed! Ah, you thought, did you, that I was going to let my happiness be buried in poor Johnnie's grave? Just wait and see, just wait!"

The cool business tone was gone. The woman with flaming black eyes, with clenched white teeth, who stood before Dick was her mother's daughter, rather than her father's.

CHAPTER VIII

"BLACK MILLY"

WHEN the proprietor of the *Star of Hope* was told that a lady-journalist wished to interview him in his private parlour he took the announcement without "turning a hair." Lady-journalists in the fine season had become a commonplace of the gold-fields, and he was used to serving as a sort of information-bureau to travellers generally.

But when he saw this particular lady-journalist he was a little taken aback, all the same, so different was she from the "unattached female," with cropped locks and peaky nose, whom he had instinctively expected. Such "stunners" as this usually found other more congenial occupations than reporting. But if the fat proprietor had any notion of airing this opinion, the desire was expeditiously crushed in the bud by the prodigiously self-possessed, the ostentatiously business-like tone in which he was greeted!

She seemed to understand her *métier*, too. It was in that semi-gracious, semi-impudent tone so dear to the profession, that she informed him of the fact that, having travelled thus far in order to collect a series of gold-field kodaks for an influential New York

paper, she intended to honour his establishment by including it in the series. Would he be so good as to have a few suitable groups arranged? Yes, he might change his dress if he liked, and perhaps he would be so kind as to summon the *personnel*.

Before the commanding glance of her eyes, as much as before the flattering prospect, the proprietor yielded without a struggle.

While the barmaids collected, giggling, the journalist - photographer might have been seen to scan their appearance with an attention which spoke volumes for her devotion to her paper. Yet the result of the inspection did not seem to satisfy her entirely.

"Are they all here?" she asked incisively.

"All there are at present. We're short of a pair of hands just now."

"Are you really?"

"Yes—had to part with my head-barmaid quite lately—or perhaps I ought to say that she parted with me, almost without warning, so to say. Put me out a lot, I can tell you. A dab-hand at the drinks she was. It's a pity for your group too, Miss—Mrs.—"

"Mrs. White," finished the journalist.

"She'd have made a grand splash in the middle of the picture, anyway."

"What was she called?" asked Mrs. White, rather quickly.

"Bella Hobson, she called herself in full, but we

never knew her as anything but Bella—'Wax-doll Bella,' the boys used to call her."

The journalist stooped a little lower over her apparatus, struggling with the focus apparently.

"And she's gone away?"

"Been gone for a matter of four weeks now."

"And where to?"

"To the devil, as likely as not. She's an out-and-outer, Bella is, but I'd give a night's takings to see her again behind the bar."

There was nothing more said for the moment, nor was the proprietor an acute enough observer to notice that the hand which held the kodak had become rather unsteady. In a vague sort of way it did indeed strike him that the lady-journalist seemed rather abruptly to have lost her interest in the group. It was not until its components had dispersed that the abstraction which had fallen upon her appeared to lift.

"It's a pity, certainly, that your head-barmaid should not have awaited my arrival," she said, in a new and lighter tone, and with the most gracious smile she had yet accorded him. "I am sure she would have improved the group. I have heard of Wax-doll Bella before as having been a leading feature of your brilliant saloon."

The proprietor positively blushed as he bowed over his flowered waistcoat; but the counter-compliment, momentarily meditated, did not reach utterance.

"To tell the truth, I had rather set my heart upon

having her portrait in my collection. But I daresay she is not very far off—perhaps in another of the settlements?”

The proprietor was not surprised—no amount of inquisitiveness on the part of a lady-journalist was capable of surprising him—but he was obviously nonplussed.

“Maybe, madam, and I should be happy to serve you if I could; but if you want my own opinion in the matter, to look for Bella on this here continent would be about as hopeful as looking for a needle in a haystack.”

“Is there anyone here likely to know her whereabouts?”

“Well, you might ask Milly—though it isn’t likely she’s left an address there, considerin’ how little love there was lost between the two.”

“Who is Milly?”

“The big black girl who stood to the right. I’ll call her back, if you like.”

“Never mind; tell me only where she lives,” said Mrs White quickly. “There is no hurry.”

With the camera in her hand, and the directions for finding Milly’s lodging stored in her memory, Elvira left the saloon. She was biting her lip somewhat hard as she did so.

Till now all had gone smoothly. The sale of the few trinkets she possessed promised fairly well to cover the cost of the excursion. Nor had she found it difficult to shake down into her new rôle. Once

only had she fallen out of it, when much annoyed by one of her fellow-passengers on the boat, a stupid old professor who had insisted on talking of the lynching case. On that occasion she was aware of having betrayed a petulance which she regretted as imprudent.

Otherwise there had been no *contretemps* until to-day. The Star of Hope had proved anything but hopeful. In the very first step of her investigations she found herself brought up against an obstacle which she had failed to foresee—the disappearance of the chief witness. And yet she might have foreseen it. The very fact of the disappearance strengthened Elvira's belief in the weight of the testimony thus withheld. If Bella had something to say, and did not want to say it, the simplest thing certainly was to withdraw from the scene.

Yet she could not vanish into thin air, and there was still Milly to be tried. It was upon Milly now, and the possible clues to be extracted from the coarse-looking, black-haired girl, that Elvira's hopes now began to concentrate. From the proprietor's words she had gathered that the two had been rivals, and what eyes are as sharp as those of a rival?

This impression gained strength during the first few minutes of the *tête-à-tête* which she managed to secure on the afternoon of this day, in the very same tin hut in which Bella had housed, and into which Milly had moved on her disappearance from the scene, just as inevitably as she had stepped into her

place behind the bar. Both berths had been equally coveted for long, since Milly's own hut leaked badly, and her talents had, in her own opinion, been kept in the shade unduly long.

The same deal table and chairs, the same green baize curtains to the window which had been there while Dick Cameron lay in hiding, still furnished the room; for Bella had been either in too great a hurry, or too improvident, to move the bulk of her belongings. In the space that still reeked of her rival's presence, Black Milly, her elbows on the table, her coarse hair tumbled about her rubicund face, now basked in the sunshine of her own rising prosperity.

"Do I know where Bella is?" she scornfully echoed the question addressed to her. "Whatever do you want with that gimcrack creature? Never could see anything in her yellow hair myself. Fancy puttin' a starched doll like that behind a bar!"

Milly said it with as deep an indignation as though it lay with her to defend the outraged traditions of the trade.

"Mrs. White" here dished up some judicious explanation — something about "types" to be collected.

"Call her a type? I call her a cat. Never could abide her smooth looks. It's with those milk-and-water airs that she ruined the men. To look at her, you would think she couldn't say 'Bo' to a goose, and yet do you suppose she could view a man without wantin' to drag him at her skirt-tails? Not

she. And she'll be playin' the same game on every spot of earth she gets to."

"But you haven't told me yet where she has got to for the present?" mildly interrupted the inquirer.

"Do you think I care? We're not over likely to correspond, are we, lovin' each other as we do?"

Milly laughed a brutally frank laugh.

"Look here, Mrs. What's-your-name! Take my advice, and don't trouble about that kind o' type. She's a snake, I tell you. Not one o' them did she leave alone—not a blessed one. Look here"—and she sat up in order to speak more emphatically—"do you see that stove over there?"

Elvira looked across at the small iron stove that blocked a corner.

"When I cleared it out, what do you suppose I found among the ashes? Why, whole bushels of letter-scrap, half-burnt and otherwise. Of course I had a look at them—why shouldn't I?—and it fairly bowled me over to see the number of sweet-hearts she had been foolin' at one and the same time. Why, the most unlikely men, even that bear Kennedy was among them. I read his name quite plainly at the bottom of a note."

"And why is he a bear?" asked Elvira abstractedly, her thoughts still running on the possibility of extracting an address.

"Because he never spoke to a woman, or to a man either, if he could help it. One of those shut-up Scotchmen who always look as though they wanted

to bite you, don't you know—but he didn't bite *her*—that's clear!"

There was an extra dose of spite in the words. Bella's conquest of the "bear," or rather the proof of virtuosity thereby given, was evidently hard to digest.

"A Scotchman?" said Elvira, with a momentary movement of interest, since in a general sort of way all Scotchmen had become to her suspicious because of that ring and the motto it bore.

And here she became abruptly thoughtful, wondering how she was to lead up to the next subject to be approached; for there was something else which she hoped to find out from Milly besides Bella's possible whereabouts.

All unwittingly Milly helped her.

"Yes; we've plenty of Scotchmen here, and they're the hardiest of the lot. Stand the cold like blazes!"

From this dexterously the journalist turned the talk to the health conditions of the district and the usual rate of mortality.

"Tell me," she presently threw in, "when anyone dies here, either suddenly or otherwise, what happens with his things?—I mean, if there are no relations. I am writing an article upon the habits of the gold-fields," she thought it prudent to throw in.

"His claim, you mean? His nuggets?"

"No; not that—but any valuables he might have—a watch, for instance, or a ring. Would that be buried with him?"

Milly laughed boisterously, tossing her hair out of her eyes.

"Buried with him? Rather not! We're not so sinfully wasteful as that."

"What happens with them, then?"

"Well, that depends partly upon who gets there first. But they generally haven't got more than a watch, and it's considered decent to leave that to the fellow who grubs him under, don't you see."

"The gravedigger? Ah, yes, of course," said Mrs. White, to whom this point of mining *etiquette* seemed to appeal rather strongly.

"And is there a regular, appointed gravedigger?"

"Well, it's been Job Dow for a good while now, and I don't think anyone is just pinin' to take the work off his hands."

.

Shortly after this the sham journalist was successfully conducting a second *tête-à-tête*, but it was not as a journalist that she *posed* this time.

"I am collecting antiquities — old things, you know," she explained to Job, whose intellectual measure she had taken within two minutes, and found conveniently low. "Old jewellery is my especial hobby. The Mr. Cameron who was killed lately possessed a curious old ring, as I happen to know — a ring with a square-cut opal in it. You probably know what has become of it, since he was wearing it at the time of his death. If you can procure

it for me I shall be ready to pay you well. What do you say to five dollars?"

Job, who, owing to an improbable combination of circumstances, happened to be sober, screwed up his chin to a vanishing point.

"A ring, you're sayin'? How should I never have seen it when I put him under the airth?"

"Ten dollars," said Elvira, not allowing his eyes to escape from under hers.

Job was becoming visibly agitated. Instinctively his fingers felt for the bottle in his pocket, as though in search of support.

"But there never was no ring!" he protested. Then, as though struck by a happy thought: "Happen the watch'll do as well? It's old eno' to suit ennybody's taste, and it's sartainly a cooriosity, seeing as how it never goes."

"Fifteen dollars."

Job hopped as high as though they had been fifteen pin-pricks.

"Rats!" he blubbered—"rats! To think o' my missin' fifteen dollars, and all through the poor gen'lman forgettin' to put on his rings!"

"You are quite sure there was no ring on his finger?"

Job shut one eye in the shadow of his hat.

"Not likely I should miss it if it were! Haven't I been overhaulin' 'em for two years an' more? But fifteen dollars—ah, bust me!"

His emotion was too obviously genuine to be

mistrusted. Elvira left him, baffled for the moment, yet more triumphant than disappointed, since the disappearance of the ring as distinctly enhanced its value as Bella's own value had been enhanced by a similar process. If the square-cut opal were in any way implicated in the murder—as in the theory cloudily forming in her mind it was implicated—then almost necessarily it would have to disappear.

CHAPTER IX

A CLUE?

THAT evening, in a private apartment of a log-house that called itself a hotel, Elvira took stock of the situation, and pushed her conclusions forward by yet another step.

"Taking the probabilities," she mused, as she paced the narrow space, "it is far more likely than not that the murderer is no longer in the camp. Even though the culprit is supposed to be discovered, nine men out of ten would fear after-revelations. And if he has only an atom of a conscience, or nerves not quite of iron, those two graves in the forest must be to him an intolerable neighbourhood. The next thing, therefore, is to find out what men have left since the date of the catastrophe—and, if possible, to ascertain the reasons of these departures."

As a result of this conclusion, and of various others, the proprietor of the Star of Hope was favoured by another visit next morning.

"Departures from the camp within the last month?" he repeated, with as little surprise as yesterday, having been informed that the numbers

were wanted for statistical purposes. "Well, for the lateness of the season they've been uncommonly few. Camp's lookin' up, you see. Fellows don't mind winterin' here for the sake of bein' first in the field in spring. Not above thirty departures within the month, I should say."

"And were these all men who had made their pile?"

"Not quite—not quite," admitted the proprietor; "put them down at a third of the number, perhaps. There were those who chucked the hope of makin' it—another third, let's say."

"And the remaining third?"

"Went off for a mixed lot o' reasons."

Pressed for greater accuracy, the proprietor began to check off these "mixed" departures upon his fat fingers.

"There's Long Tom now—it was a bad lung that made him move; and Small-pox Jim, who came into a bit o' money, quite unexpected like, and said he didn't see the fun of grubbin' for the same stuff that was lyin' ready at the bank."

He counted up nine or ten names and as many circumstantial motives.

"And then there was that big Scotchman," he added, as a sort of postscript. "We none of us quite knew what made him go, but then, we none of us knew anything about him except that he wasn't good company. Haven't seen him a dozen times in my saloon altogether," remarked the proprietor, with justifiable scorn.

"What was this Scotchman's name?"

"Kennedy, he called himself."

The name somehow seemed familiar to Elvira's ears, though she could not say why.

"Perhaps he was one of those who chucked the hopes of a 'find'?"

"Very short-sighted of him if he did, considerin' that his claim was the next one to that of the Camerons, in which the biggest find of the season had just been turned up. Maybe it was the good price for it that tempted him, since, of course, the whole hill-side had hopped straight up in the market. Still, it wasn't a sportin' thing to do, and I don't know another miner in the camp who would have been so poor-spirited as to do it. There's bucketfuls of gold comin' out o' that hill, I tell you. Makes one feel quite queer-like to think that the two chaps who first put their finger on it will never see it made into coin."

There were traces of flabby sentimentality in the creases of the proprietor's broad face.

"And all because of bein' too keen to grab it. It's the widdier who will get it all. The lawyers are huntin' for her high and low, I'm told."

"Are they really?" said Mrs. White demurely.

Then, after a short pause:

"Were there other Scotchmen besides this Kennedy among the recent departures? I require some more details as to nationalities, you see."

It appeared that there had been three other Scotchmen.

Having carefully noted their names, Elvira graciously thanked the obliging proprietor and departed.

The rest of the information which she required would be more conveniently extracted from Milly.

And Milly did not fail to come up to the expectations placed upon her.

Called upon for a personal description of the four Scotchmen on the list—for it was to these that the investigator was at present confining her attention—she readily and volubly defined David Macpherson as a “sick monkey,” Willy Greig as a “blubberin’ baby,” while Donald Leith turned out to be a “white-haired patriarch” whom increasing rheumatism had driven from the gold-fields. The circle seemed to be shrinking precipitately. Having eliminated all the non-Scotch deserters, Elvira felt now justified in eliminating both the sick monkey and the blubbering baby, besides, of course, the rheumatic patriarch.

There remained only one name on the list, that of Kennedy, whose moral description she had partly had from the proprietor. The physical one, supplied by Milly, was distinctly more favourable. His face might be ill-humoured, but it was evidently not ill-favoured, his figure manly and even powerful, his probable age just that at which men are generally deepest in the toils of women.

Elvira began to be aware of a certain acceleration

of her heart-beats. Groping about thus half in the dark, was it possible that her hand had chanced upon a clue?

But there were other tests to be applied, for, after all, the Scotch theory was but a theory as yet.

The man from whom came that ring would need not only to be a Scotchman and young, and to have left the gold-fields without apparent motive, he would also need to be a gentleman, since family crests and mottoes are confined to such.

In another minute that point too was decided. Though Milly herself was several social continents removed from a lady, her kind seldom mix up the line of demarcation between a gentleman and a "man"; nor had she any hesitation in according the higher title to the self-same individual whom she had designed as a "bear."

So this, too, tallied. Elvira was forced to bend over her note-book in order to mask the glowing exultation, and doing so, her eyes fell on the name "William Kennedy," which she had written down there to the dictation of the proprietor. With the sight of the plain letters a sudden recollection visited her.

"Listen!" she said, raising her head quickly; "what was that you told me yesterday about some torn letters in the stove, and a name you found signed there? Was it—"

"That was him too, Kennedy—whom that cat of a Bella, etc."

But the sham journalist was no longer listening. The repetition of that same name had given her a thrill that was almost a shock. It was something like testing an arithmetical problem in all the known ways, and always coming upon the same sum-total. It was all she could do not to exclaim aloud. Even as it was, she almost bit off the end of her pencil in an access of exultation that verged on savageness.

So afraid was she of betraying herself that, while Milly still chattered, she rose hastily, quivering to be gone.

Beside the window she checked herself, throwing a glance into the street, which was unusually full.

"What is it? Why are there so many people?" she asked, a little nervously.

Milly looked out.

"Ah, it's those magistrates come down to inquire into the lynching affair. It's as like as not that some of them will have to sit for it. Butcher Bob, for instance, since it's he that did the stringin' up. They're goin' back by the next boat—the magistrates are,—so no doubt the boys are takin' their last looks at 'em. It isn't every day we see live magistrates in the camp, you know."

Elvira drew back sharply from the window.

"I shall wait till the crowd is passed," she said, as with an instinctive movement she pulled down her veil.

CHAPTER X

THE CHAIN

"WELL?" said Dick. "Well?" and there were at least ten points of interrogation after the monosyllable, though it was but his second word. The first had been "Thank God!" as he drew his wife impetuously towards him, in order to press upon her lips the kiss of greeting. Now he was holding her back from him, eagerly reading her face.

"Well?"

The word brimmed over with the torture of curiosity, the impatience of the innocent man who is beginning to fret under the burden of the supposed guilt. Until lately it had been enough merely to be alive, but now this had ceased to suffice.

"Did you succeed? Will she speak? What are the prospects?"

"I do not know whether she will speak; I did not find her."

"Not find her?"

"No; she has left the settlement."

"And where is she now?"

"That has still to be ascertained. I could not procure her address."

The eagerness on Dick's face died out into blankness.

"Then you have procured nothing? brought back nothing? And you say that so quietly? You don't even look disappointed?"

"Yes; I have brought back something."

"What?"

"A name."

"A name? What name?"

"William Kennedy," said Elvira, with emphatic distinctness, and carefully watching the effect upon Dick's face.

There was no particular effect to be seen.

"Kennedy? Our neighbour on the claim? What about him?"

"Only that I am beginning to believe that he is the murderer."

He looked at her for a moment, as though to make sure that she was serious, and then broke into a despondent laugh.

"My poor Elvira! This horrid affair is evidently getting on to your brain. I should not have let you take that journey. It's because he's a Scotchman, I suppose, that you have fixed upon him. As though there were any lack of Scotchmen in the camp!"

"Of those upon whom the probabilities fit, there is a lack. It is by a process of elimination that I have reached Kennedy."

"What do you call the probabilities?"

"The most plausible assumptions ; the first of which is that the murder was a love murder."

"That knocks it on the head at once. Kennedy never looked at a woman."

"Not in public, perhaps ; but it's not those who woo by broad daylight who woo the most desperately. Can you deny that ?"

"There's no need to deny it. But this is negative evidence. Because he didn't make up to Bella in public, you jump to the conclusion that he did so in private. Oh, Logic, thy name is *not* Woman !"

"I don't jump to conclusions. I have got the proof."

And she told him of Milly's discovery among the ashes.

The effect upon him was even greater than she had looked for. With the memory of the man still alive within him, his impression of astonishment could scarcely fail to be far more vivid than hers.

"If that is true," he said slowly—"then almost anything else may be."

There was no further reference made to the logic of woman. Obviously, the infection of suspicion was beginning to spread to him.

"This point, then, is established : Kennedy was among Bella's unsuspected slaves ; and, from what I hear of him, he cannot have been an easy slave to deal with. A bad-tempered man, I gather ?"

"He certainly looked it."

"The sort of man to whom it would be possible to attribute violent passions of various sorts?"

"Yes!" Dick admitted. "There *was* rather an ugly look about his mouth; and I have seen him kicking a coolie to within an inch of perdition."

"And this violent man, who was after Bella, would certainly be jealous of Johnnie, who was after her too, and apparently favoured?"

"I suppose he would."

"And Johnnie, if he were attacked, would have no chance against this violent man, whom I also understand to be powerfully built—would he?"

"Hardly. But the attack is rather a big conclusion. After all, Kennedy was a gentleman, and even come-down gentlemen don't usually settle their love-affairs in quite so elementary a fashion as this."

"Will you contend that no gentleman has ever stabbed his rival?"

"Under momentary provocation, yes."

"And supposing the momentary provocation was there?"

"In what shape?"

"In the shape of that ring. No—don't smile, Dick; the ring is looming larger and larger upon the horizon of my vision. You have just said yourself that Kennedy was a gentleman—a Scotch gentleman. Don't forget that the original possessor of the ring must have been that too. If it was he who gave it to Bella, and if he saw it again on

Johnnie's finger, would not that be provocation enough?"

"He would not be likely to see it. He never associated with us."

"When did you see him last before the murder?"

"Oh, not for days. Stop a moment, though," and a gleam sprang to Dick's eyes. "It's a fact that I did see him only a few hours before—in the saloon. He used to appear there about once a month. I remember that it rather took us by surprise."

"Ah! and Johnnie was there too—with the ring on his finger? Will you call it jumping to conclusions if I say he saw it then?"

"There's no doubt he may have seen it."

"And was he in the saloon still when you started home with Johnnie?"

"Lord, no! His appearances were never more than glimpses. Just the time to empty a few glasses. He had cleared out ages before we left."

"Good! And his claim lay next to yours, as you say, and Johnnie reached the hut alone and considerably boozed? Is the chain complete enough yet? But it's not all; I can put in another link, for I have found out that there wasn't the shadow of a ring on Johnnie's finger when he was buried—none when Job Dow put him on to the hand-cart."

Dick rose from his chair, excitedly pushing back the curly hair from his forehead.

"But the knife, Elvira, the knife? How can you explain that?"

"I can't explain, but I can guess. You left your knife in the saloon, you say, and Kennedy was in the saloon that evening, and went away before you did. There is nothing to prevent his having taken the knife with him, either by mistake, or possibly with a purpose. You always said your knife was the sharpest in the camp, and he wanted a sharp instrument for the work he had to do. Ah, be sure of it, it was full of murderous thoughts that he set out homewards. And another thing I had almost forgotten—perhaps the most important of all: he has left the gold-fields."

"Kennedy left?"

"Yes—sold his claim, without any apparent reason, and vanished from the district—like Bella. I have no doubt that goose Milly thinks he has gone after her, but *we* know better."

Dick brought his fist down upon the table in sledge-hammer fashion.

"You're right, Elvira! The chain is complete. Let us drag it to the light of day. Why should I hide any longer? They *must* give me the justice I ask for!"

On Elvira's glowing face there fell a sudden, chill shadow.

"Not that, Dick! Not yet that! We must secure our witness first. The proofs suffice for us, but would they suffice for others? What can we prove as yet? Only that Kennedy wrote a letter to Bella, and that he has left the country. Even if we

can trace the ring to him, it would not be enough; for no doubt Bella got plenty of other presents, and there are hundreds of ways of explaining its disappearance. While Johnnie lay dead in the hut, it could have been stolen a dozen times over, could it not? I *feel* that it wasn't; but those cold lawyers don't feel, they only argue. Oh, you don't know what a fright I got upon the boat. There were two magistrates among the passengers, returning from the camp. They had been sent to inquire into poor Johnnie's case, you know. I kept out of their way, of course, but once I could not help hearing their talk. They were discussing the affair from their own private point of view, and do you know what one of them said to the other? He remarked that, after all, there was something to be said for popular justice, and that Judge Lynch seldom makes a mistake. In this case—in *your* case, Dick—there certainly had been no mistake. It was as clear as daylight, they agreed. Quite a vulgar money murder, very naively executed—possibly under the influence of drink. No jury could have found another verdict than the one found by the mob; and, on the whole, you had come off better than you deserved, since you had been spared the long torture of waiting for the end. Oh, Dick, it made me quite cold to hear them!"

Her arms were round his neck now, clasping him convulsively, as though to make sure that she still held him.

For a moment husband and wife looked into each other's terror-stricken eyes, for over Dick too there had run a shiver, awakened by ghastly recollections. The glow of hope and of defiance was extinguished. The man who had once before felt the cord round his neck, who, to all intents and purposes, had once already drained the cup of death, abruptly lost courage to face the world, bitterly aware that innocence alone is no safe ground beneath the feet.

"No, no ; it is true, Elvira," he said hoarsely. "I cannot show myself. I must lie hidden—but till when?"

"Till further steps are taken."

"And these are?"

"They are quite plain to me," said Elvira, unclasping her hands from his neck, and becoming in one instant the collected business woman. "I made my programme during the voyage. The first thing to be done is to get money—the gold claim will do that. To-morrow I go to a solicitor with my papers, and put that part of the matter into his hands. The second thing to do is to set the detectives to work. There are such things as secret agencies, I know. I shall make my pick of them, and then I shall set them three tasks:

"Firstly: The discovery of Bella Hobson's present abode.

"Secondly: Of Kennedy's whereabouts.

"Thirdly: To which Scotch family the crest with

the eagle's claw and the dagger and that strange motto belongs.

"With money none of these points ought to be hard to clear up, and that claim will bring in mountains of money—I found that out too. We shall have to wait, of course, and meanwhile I shall go on living as before—it will attract less attention—only that I shall change my name—White will do very well for the present—which entails my changing my lodging."

"We can stay together now, Elvira," said Dick, catching at her hand.

But she shook her head decisively.

"No, Dick; we cannot. It will be safer not, in case I am recognised. Even in this ant-hill, recognitions are possible. We can meet, that is all; and Mr. Brown can be our go-between. We can't keep him out of the secret now, since he has put himself into it, and I have a notion that he is going to be extremely useful."

"So be it!" said Dick, with a sigh. "Oh, Johnnie, Johnnie—how long shall I have to skulk like a rat in a hole, because of you and your philandering, my lad?"

CHAPTER XI

FOUND AND LOST

IT was less than two months after this complaint had been uttered that Elvira, somewhat breathlessly, entered the obscure lodging which served as a hole to the poor human rat in question, and where Dick passed his uneasy days waiting for something that would not come, venturing out only either in the thickest of the crowd or under the cover of darkness.

The first look on the occasion of these clandestine visits was invariably a question—answered, until to-day, by a dumb headshake. To-day, however, there was something different in her face.

"Something has come?" he asked, rising in eager expectation. "They have found Bella?"

"No. But something has come, all the same—something that I *knew* would come. Read that!"

She held towards him a paper which she had taken from her hand-bag.

"MADAM,—We have the honour of informing you that according to instructions received, the eagle's claw, *dexter, proper*, grasping a dagger, *or*, and subscribed with the motto: '*Gae ye claw me, I'll*

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claw thee,' has for two centuries past been used as a crest by the Kennedys of Ecclesrigg, which property is situated in the county of Firthshire in Scotland (Great Britain), and in the close neighbourhood of the town of St. Damian.

"The other inquiries, touching the present place of residence of William Kennedy, formerly of the Meekon settlement in the Klondyke district, and of Arabella Hobson from same place, are on foot, and we trust to be able shortly to report progress. —Always at your service, faithfully,

"SPINKER & BASH,
"Private Information Agency."

Thus ran the type-written sheet.

"Have you any further doubt now that the ring came from Kennedy?" asked Elvira, with, in her voice, a quiver of triumph.

She was feeling a little of that which the blood-hound feels when he gets his nose full upon the scent.

Dick grasped his forehead with one hand, as though to hold fast some thought.

"No, I have no doubt. But, Elvira, something has happened to my memory; this paper has somehow prodded it awake. I know now that it was upon Kennedy's watch-chain that I saw the ring with the opal dangling. I told you that I had the photograph in my mind, only that I could not place it. Even the details come back to me now. I had gone over to Kennedy's claim to borrow a diamond for cutting

a pane of glass ; somebody had told me that he had one in a ring. He was very churlish about it, but he could not well refuse. There were two rings on his watch-chain. I suppose they bothered him while at work—one was the ring with the diamond, and beside it the one with the opal. Why could I not remember it before ? ”

“ Because nothing is as tricky as human memory. But it’s all right now. The detectives have absolved one of their tasks.”

“ But the others ? ” said Dick, relapsing into despondency. “ Supposing they never find Bella ? ”

“ They will find her—they must ; and they will find him too—the cowardly murderer who stabbed in the dark—the base wretch who allowed an innocent man to suffer in his place ! Oh, how I long to stand opposite to William Kennedy, and to hurl my contempt into his crabbed face ! Yes ; the chase is going to be hot now ! ”

Her eyes were shining with an almost savage brilliancy, as she closed her small hands beside her. At this moment she did not look like a woman from whom mercy was to be expected. Thus may the Spanish *donnas*, who were her ancestresses, have looked ; thus may their eyes have flashed as they bent over their balconies the better to follow the death-struggle of the bull in the arena.

But in an instant her vindictive rapture had turned to the practical considerations of the moment.

"County of Firthshire—town of St. Damian," she re-read, taking up the letter again to scan it keenly. "I shall set them now to gather details of the family: what members it consists of—why this one has gone fortune-hunting—a younger son, no doubt. Oh, there will be quantities of things to find out. St. Damian—St. Damian—let me see—surely I have heard that name before?—and not long ago either. I have it—yes! It was when Mr. Brown was mending my twine bag, and I asked him where he had learnt to make such beautiful sailor's knots. He told me on the East Coast of Scotland. I couldn't help laughing. 'Have you been there too?' I inquired. 'Will I ever hear of a spot of earth where you haven't been?' And he replied rather curtly that he had been for a matter of two years at the Scottish University town of St. Damian's. 'As professor or student?' I asked, for he looked so preternaturally solemn. 'As quite as useful a member of society as any professor I ever heard of,' was his reply. But if he really has been two years at St. Damian's, he can't help knowing something of the neighbourhood. I shall question him at once. 'Maybe I can get some of my curiosity satisfied without waiting for the detective's report.'"

Full of the new idea, she sought out her watchdog; nor was he far to seek, for Mr. Brown had unavoidably followed his benefactress into her new lodging. "Who was to clean 'Missy's' boots or oil her machine, if he were not at hand?" he indignantly

asked ; for Elvira, now with money at her disposal,—and much more money than she had dared to hope for, the sale of the gold claim having, in one day, transformed her into a capitalist,—had altered nothing about her outward manner of living. To spend even a penny on her own comforts would have seemed to her a crime, so long as the proof of Dick's innocence was not purchased—and who could say whether that proof might not cost all she had !

Almost the only luxury she allowed herself was that of feeding the funny old Irishman, who had developed into a very useful sort of maid-of-all-work, and whom circumstances had forced upon her as a confidant.

But on this occasion he did not seem to be in a particularly obliging humour.

“St. Daymian ?” he repeated, shooting a somewhat suspicious glance from out of the corners of his small eyes. “Whatever do ye want to know about such a fozzled playce as St. Daymain's ?”

She brought up the name of Kennedy.

“Kaynedy ? Kaynedy ? I know nothin' about no Kaynedy,” said Mr. Brown, almost roughly.

“But you must have heard the name, surely, in two years,” Elvira insisted. “Their property is in the immediate neighbourhood of the town.”

“I'm no' sayin' it isn't ; but my occupaytions were not such as brought me greatly in touch with the gentry,” observed Mr. Brown, with a slightly sardonic twitch of his thin lips, as he worked away

vigorously at Elvira's small hand-mirror, which he was carefully polishing.

"What *were* your occupations, Mr. Brown. You have never told me that?"

"They were of a mixed natur', so to say," he replied, shooting her another glance, in which she was astonished to note an element of defiance.

"Whatever they were, they can't have put cotton-wool in your ears, and in small towns people always chatter. Do you mean to say that in two years you never heard the name of Kennedy mentioned?"

"Not to my re'lection, Missy."

"Mr. Brown, you're a fraud!" she exclaimed petulantly. "I don't believe you were ever there at all!"

The old man's high shoulders heaved with suppressed merriment.

"Some folks would say, Missy, that it would be just as well for me if I hadn't. It's there I broke my leg, to be sure—just to take one thing. And there were others. I'm no the man to boast of my expayriences, Missy, but it's just on the cards, you see, that I know St. Daymian as well as its oldest inhabitant; aye, and maybe a bit better," he chuckled, "though I don't happen to be able to tell ye about these Kaynedy folks."

Clearly there was nothing for it but to wait for the detective's report.

It came in due time, and from it Elvira learnt that the Kennedys had, for close upon two centuries,

been settled at Ecclesrigg, a fairish property, two miles from St. Damian—that the present head of the family was Geoffrey Kennedy, aged thirty-two, married one year back, as yet without issue, having been in possession of the family property since his father's death, two years ago; furthermore, that the laird's younger brother, William, aged twenty-eight, was reported as being of a turbulent and quarrelsome character, that he had left the country after his father's death, having broken with his brother, and had since held no communication with him.

The efforts of the Agency to ascertain the whereabouts of this same William Kennedy, as well as of the missing barmaid, were reported as being diligently pursued.

Having noted the facts and approved of them, as fitting unimpeachably into her theory, Elvira began again to wait, possessing her soul with what patience she could.

The winter passed wearily; but with the first stir of the sap in the branches came a change in the stagnation of the inquiry.

"Important news. Verbal report desirable." Thus ran the wire message which she read with beating heart and reviving courage.

Half an hour later, she was at the Agency.

She was received by a paternal personage, whose marvellously cultivated side-whiskers slightly suggested the "heavy father."

"The delay has been rather protracted," he blandly

explained; "but to-day I am in the position to give you two pieces of information which have reached us almost simultaneously. These things often do come in bunches."

"You have found the woman?" asked Elvira, trembling with impatience.

"We have found her—exactly. This document will instruct you."

Elvira almost snatched the paper from him.

Here, in a highly legible clerk's hand, it stood recorded that Arabella Hobson, serving as barmaid in the Silver Lynx Hotel in Melbourne, Australia, had, on the 7th day of February, succumbed to the prevailing epidemic of typhoid fever.

"But this is a certificate of death!" exclaimed Elvira, turning white.

"Exactly."

"At Melbourne! But can it be her? Why, this would undo us completely!"

"It is undoubtedly the person we have been tracking," affirmed the "heavy father," as blandly as ever.

It was nothing to him who was done or undone. Arabella Hobson had to be traced, alive or dead. She had been traced, and the reputation of the Agency was vindicated. That was all that touched him.

While he summed up the proofs of Bella's identity, Elvira sat like one annihilated.

"And your second piece of news?" she asked dully.

"The second piece of news is likewise of an obituary nature."

"What! *He* is dead too? William Kennedy is dead?"

"No, not William Kennedy. It is his brother Geoffrey, who, according to a cable just received, died two days ago of a heart attack."

"Ah!" said Elvira, almost indifferently. "But that doesn't interest me at all."

"If you are still anxious to trace William Kennedy, I think it ought to interest you. Our researches have hitherto been baffled; but, considering that his brother has died childless, this event is almost bound to bring about his reappearance—for the estate is entailed."

"Are you sure of that?" she asked quickly.

"Madam, we never make assertions of which we are not sure," replied the agent, in his very heaviest father style.

In deep perturbation, Elvira hurried to Dick's lodgings.

"Found and lost—all at one blow!" she bitterly commented. "And at Melbourne! How determined she must have been not to speak! Well, her mouth is stopped now—for ever!"

"It is all up, then?"

Elvira had been sitting with her head between her hands, but at the sound of the tone in which the words were spoken she sprang to her feet, trembling with compassion and tenderness,

for it had been the quietly flat tone of a broken man.

"Up? No; it is not up! It never will be up, so long as I breathe!"

"But since we have lost our only witness?"

"She is not the only one; there is another."

"Which other?"

"Kennedy himself. He shall testify against himself—I swear that he shall! I shall track him down; I shall fling the accusation in his face so suddenly, so surely, that he will stagger under the assault. Yes, yes; let me find him only, and I shall tear his secret from him. Unless—"

The fixed intensity of her pale and passionate face relaxed abruptly. A new thought seemed to have dawned uncertainly in the black depths of her wonderful eyes.

"Unless I find that there is a better way than *tearing* it."

CHAPTER XII

JÆL

"UNLESS I should discover that there is a better way than tearing it."

Her own words pursued Elvira long after she had returned to her lodging. Already she had caught a glimpse of that "better way." Was not the process of *luring* far safer than that of *tearing*, as well as infinitely more feasible? Just as wile belonged to the most intimate weapons of her sex, in contradistinction to violence, even though it were but a moral violence?

But in order to *lure* in accordance with that sex's best traditions, it would be necessary to face the fact that she was a young woman, and that her intended victim was a young man, and she had faced it already. It was exactly the lightning-like grasping of this fact which was responsible for the birth of the idea.

Having reached this point in her reflections, Elvira unavoidably drew her mirror into the argument. There was nothing to be seen there which could discourage the wild project beginning to shape itself in her brain; there was much, on the contrary, to spur her audacity. The marvellous

contrast between the darkness of her hair and the fairness of her complexion was in itself a trump-card—for Elvira's skin was free of even that suggestion of sallowness which marks the average brunette—of a freshness that was as fine as porcelain in its grain, a gift laid in her cradle by the dead hands of Anglo-Saxon forefathers. And set in this perfect face, her mother's eyes—two black worlds of velvet shadows and golden lights, and with youth and passion and the very intensity of life looking out of them—was it likely that any man could resist?

True, having never yet put out her full powers (in Dick's case a ridiculously superfluous proceeding), she might be supposed ignorant of their extent; but no doubt disturbed her on a subject in which instinct is ever a safer guide than experience.

Of herself she felt serenely sure. And of Kennedy?

Of him she knew only that he was not unsusceptible to feminine allurements; but that was enough. Nor did she give a second thought to Bella's memory—of her she was not afraid—nor of any other woman either. How should she be with her mirror before her?

And yet so much was there of distasteful in the project, that for days and weeks she carried it about with her not able either to drop it or to take it up. And all this time her eyes—through those of the Agency—remained fixed across the ocean upon one

spot in Scotland. Until something happened there, there was no need to come to a final resolution. And how easily nothing might happen! Might he not have disappeared for ever in some wild adventure? or else be too conscience-stricken to claim his own?

It was the impetus given by the next communication from Messrs. Spinker & Bash which ended by weighing down the balance.

The news met her one summer evening on her return from Dick's lodging. She had found him more desperate than usual, beginning to ail even physically under the pressure of his unnatural position, and half resolved to reveal himself at all hazards—a suggestion which never failed to strike new terror to her heart. Was this to go on for ever?

At home she found the letter from the Agency informing her that William Kennedy had returned to take possession of his estate.

"At last!" she said aloud, while in an instant her wavering resolution leaped up, armed to the teeth, like a warrior prepared for battle.

No, it was not going to go on like that for ever; she knew now what she was going to do, what nothing more should turn her from until her purpose was accomplished. The appalling newness of the idea was gone by this time; in three weeks of latent reflection she had grown familiar enough with it no longer to shrink from its audacity.

And again she went to her mirror.

"Thank Heaven for my face!" she murmured.
"Thank Heaven for my eyes—for my skin!"

Never before had she felt so vivid a gratefulness for the gift of her beauty, as now when she saw therein the instrument that was to work the salvation of the innocent man and the confounding of the guilty one.

But there was still the innocent man himself to be reckoned with ; and although she did not doubt her ability to gain his consent, the sooner it was done the better it would be.

How best to do it was what occupied her wakeful hours that night. Before she slept she thought she had found it.

Next evening, at the hour of her usual visit to Dick, she put two rather strange and incongruous things into the basket of provisions which usually accompanied her—one of them was a bottle of champagne which she had caused Mr. Brown to purchase that morning—the other a miniature and much-worn family Bible, hunted up from the bottom of her trunk.

As she entered the room Dick was struck by a new expression on her face—a sort of suppressed excitement, veiled by a gravity that was almost solemnity.

"I have brought you something, Dick," she explained ; "something which I think you need. You struck me yesterday as dangerously depressed. Perhaps this will serve as a fillip."

And she drew the champagne-bottle from its wrappings.

Dick laughed, kissing her tenderly.

"What a child you are, Elvira, in spite of everything! Do you think you can cure my low spirits with champagne?"

"Not with champagne alone. I have something else too. But tell me first whether I have chosen the right brand?"

The brand was unimpeachable: even the tumbler in which perforce it was drunk could not conceal that fact; and as he sipped the foaming liquid and felt the blood beginning to quicken in his veins—in spite of all logic, in defiance of his better judgment, the future proceeded to take upon itself something of the rosy tinge of the wine.

"That will do for the body," reflected Elvira, observing him. "Now, let's have a go at the mind."

"Here is the other thing I brought you, Dick," she said, producing the little old Bible which had belonged to her father. "Lots of people find consolation in this Book, do they not? and why should you not find it too? I mean to read you aloud a chapter to-day. Do you mind?"

"As if I could mind anything coming from you!" said Dick, in a tone in which, nevertheless, a little resignation pierced beside the surprise. "But isn't champagne and Scripture rather a queer combination?"

"Not at all. There's a lot about wine, and more about drinking-bouts, in the Scriptures themselves. Now listen!"

Opening the Book somewhere about the middle at a page carefully marked by a slip of paper, Elvira began to read very slowly and distinctly.

It was the story of the oppression of Israel by the Canaanites, and of Sisera's tragic end in Jael's tent.

Only when she had finished she raised her eyes to his face.

"Not much consolation to be got out of that lady's doings," said Dick, more puzzled than ever. "I wonder you should care to dwell upon a person who stands as a disgrace to her sex."

"I don't consider her a disgrace; I consider her an honour. Did she not save the chosen people at the risk of her own life? And is not all fair in love and war?"

"H-m. But it was a shabby trick to play him, all the same, after luring him on in that way."

"What other way had she? Against brute force what other weapons have we women but our wits—and our charms?"

He looked at her earnest face more attentively.

"Elvira, why are you telling me this to-day?"

Getting up quickly, she came over to his side of the table, and nestling upon his knee, laid her arms around his neck and whispered in his ear:

"Because you need not call me Elvira any longer, but only Jael—because I am going to do what Jael did."

"Drive a nail through my head, eh?" he laughed, gazing bewildered into the eyes so close to his.

"No, not into yours—into that of William Kennedy. And it won't be a nail either, it will be an arrow, and it is not his head I will aim at, but his heart."

"Elvira!"

He would have pushed her from him in an impulse of anger, but her hands still clung about his neck.

"Listen to me first! Ever since the news of Bella's death, I have been trying to find another way, but I know now that there is no other. Kennedy has got to be brought to confession, since we have no more witnesses, and the only way of bringing him to confession is by laying a trap. There is only one sort of trap that a woman can lay for a man; you know it. That is the trap I mean to lay for Kennedy. I shall place myself in his path, and I shall conquer him. I shall take possession of his senses and of what heart he possesses; and when I have him at my feet, I shall draw from him—lure from him—coax from him the proof I need—the proof of your innocence and of his guilt!"

Dick had listened in a sort of stupor. Even when she ceased, he still sat wordless for a minute.

"If that is your plan," he said at last slowly, "then it will be best if Kennedy is never found."

"He is found already."

"Found? Kennedy found?" he exclaimed, in a tone whose eagerness belied the words just spoken. "Where? When?"

"He has returned to Scotland to claim his inheritance."

"Ah!"

As Dick leant forward to take another sip of the champagne, the animation of his eyes made it clear that the news had moved him deeply.

"But no!" he burst out, after another moment, as though in answer to his own thoughts. "It is unthinkable!"

"Do you doubt my success?"

"On the contrary, I am afraid of it. I know you could turn the head of a devil or an archangel, if once you set yourself to it. Yes—the plan is perfect, so far. But the thought of your being within a mile of that scoundrel—of having to smile at him, to let him touch even your hand—and all that would have to be—ah, it is unbearable!"

"I believe you're going to say next that you're jealous!" she smiled, taking him softly by the chin in order to look into his rebellious blue eyes.

There was no choice but to gaze back, and, gazing, he was undone. The fire, of which a spark had flown over to him from the eyes opposite, seemed to be running a race in his veins with that other fire which the wine had kindled there, and in their combined glow all things seemed possible.

"But how far would you go?" he asked, faltering.

"As far as seems necessary. As far, at any rate, as to bring me into possession of the opal ring. And even though it should have to play the part of an engagement ring—no, don't start, Dick—what's the odds? Once the ring has been found in his

possession our point is gained. We can bring our accusation to the light of day, for witnesses for having seen the ring on Johnnie's finger the day before his death there are plenty. In the light of this proof all our other proofs will grow strong—strong enough even for a court of justice.”

“That is true,” said Dick, in deep disturbance.

“And, Dick, it is *everything* that is at stake for us—remember that!—all our future, which may be long. Are we to grow old with this weight upon us? You can easily live for fifty years more; do you want to be the rat in the hole for all that time? As for me, I shall be gone long before; I cannot exist like this, it is not in me, I must either fight for my happiness and my love, or I must die—and since human justice fails us, let us have recourse to other human means. What good is my beauty to me, what good is my wit, if with it I cannot reconquer that which the cruelty of life has robbed us of?”

Her lips were upon his as she ended, and his could murmur only: “My love! My love!” as he held her tight within his arms.

Though he had not consented in words, she knew that he was gained.

“There is one thing only that weighs on me,” she said presently; “that is the separation. I shall have to establish myself at St. Damian's, of course, on some pretext or other; but in a small place like that, and in Scotland too, you could never be kept concealed. Nothing nearer than London would be

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quite safe, I fear—and that is awful to think of, Dick. The rest is fairly easy. I shall make my *début* as a rich young widow—I have thought that part out already—a Californian widow, it had better be, which will explain my appearance. I shall have to take a house, perhaps to buy one—oh, how glad I am that I have squandered none of the money! And as for pretexts, I won't bother about that; if a rich young widow isn't to have caprices, then who is? It's really going to be rather amusing, I believe!"

She had sprung from his knee and was lightly pacing the room. It was another element in her nature that had now come to the fore. She was beginning to scent the excitement of the adventure.

"Do you know what I am thinking?" asked Dick, as he watched her.

"What?"

"I am wondering whether there is more of the child in you or more of the tiger."

She laughed gaily.

"When you speak of Kennedy you look positively bloodthirsty; and yet you are able to talk of this enterprise as though you were planning a picnic."

She waved him off.

"Never mind that now; those are irrelevant remarks. There are other things to think of. What I am wondering is whether Mr. Brown can't tell me anything about houses, and whom I had better apply to. His knowledge of St. Damian seems to be so strangely unequal."

CHAPTER XIII

MR. BROWN'S POCKET-BOOK

MR. BROWN, put to the test that same evening, proved to be better informed on the subject of houses than he had showed himself upon that of county gentry.

"It's a house at St. Daymian's ye're after?" he repeated, with the absence of surprise which became a man of his experience. "I'm thinkin' there'll be no great difficulty about that. A power of houses to be had round about the place, and in it too, for the matter of that. Is it a big one ye'll be wantin'?"

"A good-sized one, certainly, since I'm going to play the rich lady at last. Just what a well-off single woman would need."

"A *seengle* woman?" repeated Mr. Brown.

"Yes, of course. I could not let my husband be seen there, you know, until everything is cleared up."

"And where will ye lave him manewhile?"

"That's the bad part of it—in London, I suppose. He couldn't be safe from recognition in a place like St. Damian's."

"Are ye goin' to lave him there lang?"

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"That depends; until—a plan of mine has succeeded—or else failed."

"Ah, it's a plan ye're after—I've been thinkin' it would be. Maybe, Missy, ye'll be wantin' that Kaynedy man sthrangled?" he asked, with a new interest, laying down the shoe he was cleaning, as though in preparation for immediate action.

"No, no," laughed Elvira. "I don't want him strangled at all—not for the present, at any rate," she said, under her breath. "I have another plan—a much better one."

Mr. Brown took up the shoe again resignedly.

"If it's your plan, Missy, it's sure to be a graand one," he observed, blindly confident.

"It *is* grand. Oh, but I do hope it won't take too long! It will be horrible having Dick out of sight."

"H-m," said Mr. Brown; "that idea sames to disthurb you powerful, Missy."

"Of course, it does. I shall dream every moment that he is being recognised and arrested."

"You'd be aisier, no doubt, if ye could have him close?"

"I should think so! But that's impossible, I know," she concluded despondently.

For that day Mr. Brown made no further remark on the subject, though there was a certain pensiveness in the way in which he continued to lay on the blacking, and which could not well be ascribed to the occupation itself.

He interrupted it, in fact, the moment that he

was left alone, and although the second shoe was still awaiting its turn. Bringing up a key from the depths of a waistcoat pocket, he went to the trunk in a corner, whose painted wood betrayed an Oriental origin, and which represented his entire baggage. Unlocking it, he rummaged for a while, and came back to the table with a large, much dilapidated pocket-book in his hand. Out of an inner flap he drew a paper, limp with age and barely holding together at the creases. With gingerly care, he unfolded it and spread it on the table below the shade of the small petroleum lamp. The yellowish paper showed black lines, a series of irregular squares hanging together and suggesting the ground-plan of some building. There were numbers and strange, hieroglyphical-looking marks put in at places in red ink. These Mr. Brown, as he hung over the table, compared carefully with some notes in the pocket-book, nodding his large head from time to time, and softly grunting to himself the while.

Next morning he was at "Missy's" door, to take the orders for the day. This was normal. Having talked them over, he did not depart at once, but stood before her, rubbing his stubbly chin, which, with him, was invariably a symptom of embarrassment. And this was not entirely normal.

"If ye wud allow me in for ten minutes, Missy," he observed diffidently, "maybe we could talk a bit."

There was something so significant about the set

of his ungainly features that Elvira, for all answer, beckoned him in peremptorily.

"I've been thinkin' over what you said consairnin' that house at St. Daymian's," he began guardedly, "and I've been turnin' over in my mind whether there mightn't be a way of givin' you your will."

"About what?"

"About havin' your man beside you, and yet not beside you, so to say."

"You are thinking of a disguise? But we could not risk that."

"It's no disguise I'm thinkin' of, though a bit of a wig might come in useful. Maybe there's another way. If things at St. Daymian's are as they were eighteen years ago, there *ought* to be another way. But a power o' things change in eighteen years."

"I don't understand you in the least," said Elvira, bewildered.

"It's no so very hard to undhersthand. It's only that there's a certain house come into my mind which might happen to suit yer pairposes—takin' things to have remained as they were."

"Do speak plain English."

"It's Ainglish I'm speakin', to be sure, and maybe it'll get plainer. But tell me this fust, Missy: would yer thrust me with a big thing? Would ye put money into my hands and send me off to Scotland to see with my own eyes whether anything has changed there in these eighteen years, and to judge

on the spot whether it's a possible thing I'm thinkin' of or not?"

"I would trust you, certainly. But please explain."

"It's an explanation that's no just convanient," remarked Mr. Brown, rubbing his chin with increased intensity. "It's got some resaimblance to puttin' one's ain head in a noose, Missy—but it'll no be your ain hand, will it, that would dhraw the noose thight?"

His small eyes scanned her with a quite new nervousness.

"I would never do anything to harm you, Mr. Brown. You must know that."

"Bless your gholden heart! I knew it, sure! But there's just anaither question: you've heard me say a power of times that roight and wrong is a mayter of opaynion. Do ye hold with me there?"

"Right and wrong. Surely the line is quite clear between them—oh, no, but it isn't!"

She interrupted herself at a sudden recollection, for was not her own action towards Kennedy a case in point?

"I knew you'd see it, Missy. This is the way I look at it. Before the law a croime's a croime, of course; but before one's private judgment there are two sorts of croimes, so to say: the respaictable ones and the not respaictable, or maybe the clane ones and the dhirty ones. To stab a man in the back or to pick his pocket is a dhirty croime, in my opaynion."

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"And the clean crimes?" asked Elvira, in high amusement.

"The clane crimes are such things as smugglin' or poachin', or"—he paused, with his eyes furtively watching her face—"or printhin' bank-notes on your own account," he added, with a drop in his voice.

"Money-forging!" repeated Elvira. "But that's a crime!"

"A respaictable one," corrected Mr. Brown; "but why is it any worse than smugglin', I ask ye? and do not the most respaictable gintlemen bring their cigars into the counthry inside their top-hats, and the most lovely ladies sew up their laces in their sthays, God bless thim! It's not as though any poor people were harmed by it, and can't the Sthate look after itself? Why, it's proud the Sthate ought to be to have such handy subjects within its borders! for it takes a power of cleverness, I can tell ye, to printh a bank-note."

"Well, that's certainly a new view of the case, but surely we're wandering from the point? You wanted to tell me something about a house?"

"This *is* the point, Missy; and it's now I'm goin' to put my head into the noose."

Pulling out a rag of a handkerchief, he passed it across his shining forehead.

"You've asked me, times enough, consarnin' my occupaytions, and I've told you they were vayrious. The one that took me to St. Daymian's is the very

one we're speakin' of: these same bank-notes, to be sure."

"Mr. Brown!" ejaculated Elvira, with wide eyes.

"Don't look at me like that, Missy, or I'll dhrap down dead at your feet! I've told you my opaynion of the thrade. It's a mighty fascinatin' one, I can tell ye—though I never was more than an apprentice, so to say. There were four o' them that worked the press—a company, they called themselves—and they took me on as a kind of attendant. They needed someone to do the cookin', you see, and they wouldn't thrust a woman. Then, when they found me handy, they taught me to use the press too. For two years all went as gay as a song, for we had got into a place which had many advantaiges—oh, very grate advantaiges. Then the police got on the scent, but we cleared out in toime, though rather in a hurry, and in that hurry I got my broken laig."

"Why do you tell me all this?"

"Because it's the only way to explain how I came to know a certain little circumstance about the house I'm spakin' of—the one which I've a notion moight suit your purpose, Missy. Have I your lave to spake?"

At an impatient sign from her he first went to the door and took a look up and down the passage. Then, pulling the old pocket-book from his coat pocket, he slowly and cautiously approached the table.

CHAPTER XIV

MADAME DE LOGEZ

IT was only around exclusively feminine tea-tables that anything except golf and university courses had a chance of a proper airing at St. Damian's; and even here you would be liable to catch the word "bunker" or "exam" almost as often as that of "bonnet" or even of "spring sale."

But to-day it was different. The four ladies assembled around Mrs. Annicker's tea-table had no attention over for anything but the topic in hand.

"Has anyone seen her yet?" inquired the hostess, a tall, scraggy woman, who, despite her height, gave the impression of having been fashioned out of insufficient materials—having too little flesh on her bones, too few teeth in her mouth, and on her head a thin crop of hair, which, moreover, appeared to have been vigorously scratched among by an energetic hen.

"I have," answered a large, ruddy, spectacled and beaming spinster, of anything between thirty and fifty. "I've seen her; and all I say is: St. Damian can lick all its ten fingers!"

"Someone said she was good-looking."

It was a young, insignificantly pretty woman in widow's weeds who made the remark, in a tone which seemed to imply that the stranger's good looks were somehow a personal aggrievement.

She had one of those mouths that have not been made to close, and which, by leaving two tiny, white teeth chronically exposed, vaguely suggested some small rodent animal.

"Good-looking? She's a beauty, I tell you! As black as coal and as white as milk, and knows how to dress too. A fine show she'll make at our town ball next winter!"

"But does anybody know anything about her?" inquired a tired, lady-like person with a cough.

"Nothing, except that she pays cash down for everything she gets. What better introduction than that?"

"I wonder if we shall have to call?" observed the scraggy hostess, with pensive caution.

Miss M'Dill laughed robustly.

"I don't know if you'll *have* to call, but I'm quite sure you *will* call, even if it were only to see how she has done up the house. I believe it's a dream of beauty."

"That looks as if she meant to entertain," remarked the lady-like woman, her tired eyes brightening at the prospect.

"No doubt about that. She's having new floorings put into the big drawing-room, and two tennis

courts laid out. What else can that mean but dances and garden parties?"

"Yes; I suppose we shall have to call," said Mrs. Annicker, with a gently resigned sigh.

"It's very strange that so young a widow should be so gay," complained the other widow present, shaking out her own weeds more effectively. "Her husband can't be dead so very long, after all."

"The whole thing *is* a little abnormal," admitted the scraggy hostess. "It's the first time I can recollect anyone settling here for anything except golf, not to speak of the colleges, of course; and from such a way off, too, as California is! However will she stand our east winds?"

"And the idea of spending all that money upon that damp old Craig Manor!" said Mrs. Filips, between two coughs; "a house that nobody ever stays in for two years running. I'm told she paid quite a ridiculous price for it; and when there are so many nice new villas to be had."

"Oh, well, millionaires have got ~~these~~ sort of fancies; and it's notorious that people from the New World always hate new things. For my part, I'm not going to inquire too closely into her motives or her antecedents, but am just going to take the gifts of the gods thankfully. It's high time someone came to stir up this musty old place. And what do I care whether she's been too easily consoled? Mr. de Logez may have been a horror, for anything

we know—men usually are,” added the fearless spinster, with a quite unabashed look at the three other women.

“And yet it would seem that she is looking out for a successor,” observed Mrs. Filips, “else why all these social preparations?”

“We shall have all our bachelors at her heels presently, Mrs. Kennedy,” and with rather a wooden attempt of playfulness, the hostess looked across at the young widow. “You had better keep your eyes upon that brother-in-law of yours, in case he’s a marrying man.”

“William? Oh, he’s not that at all. I don’t think there can be any danger for William. Oh, no; surely he will not marry!”

She said it with an anxiety that almost bordered on agitation, and looking more than ever like a rodent animal, as she displayed her small teeth.

“Oh, yes; he’ll marry some day,” said Miss M’Dill serenely; “in fact, it’s his duty to. You don’t want the family to die out, do you?”

“But William never goes into society,” persisted the widow, with more animation than she had yet shown. “He is so *farauche*—you cannot imagine how *farauche* he is. I have only spoken to him a few times—about business, but I really don’t want to speak to him again. Even from his look it is easy to understand that Geoffrey couldn’t get on with him. And as for marriage—well, I should like to see the woman brave enough for it.”

"I fancy St. Damian contains various such heroines," said Miss M'Dill drily. "When you talk of courage, you forget to reckon with the acreage of the place."

And meanwhile there was a mental rider added, which ran somewhat as follows :

"Can't bear the idea of another woman reigning at Ecclesrigg. I always said she was the dog in the manger."

The party was breaking up when Mrs. Annicker observed :

"Oh, and have you heard the other piece of news? Fifty-two Bower Street has got another inhabitant at last."

"The House of Riddles? I *thought* I saw a light in it the other night."

"Really," said Miss M'Dill, with her vigorous laugh, "it would appear that St. Damian is looking up in the world. Another rich widow, I hope?"

"A widow, very likely, but scarcely a rich one, since she doesn't keep a single servant. A Mrs. Wilson, I think, or something like that, and she's bought the house, so Susie heard. My information all came from Susie, I must explain. She was coming back with the fresh cakes for tea, and happened to be passing the house at the very moment when a fly stopped at the door. Naturally, Susie couldn't pass without seeing who got out of it; a fly at the door of the House of Riddles was not a thing to be resisted. But neither she nor the other idlers collected got

much satisfaction, for it was dusk already, and all they saw was a very big old woman in an extraordinary poke-bonnet which quite screened off her face, and with quite a heap of shawls about her, with which she seemed to be getting continually entangled.

"'Big enough to show herself for money,' was Susie's verdict. But she hasn't shown herself at all since, either for money or otherwise, so I am told."

"Ah, well; no garden parties to be looked for there, anyway," commented Miss M'Dill, as she buttoned her jacket. "I'll have to stick to my Californian beauty, I see. Upon my word, I think I shall call there to-morrow."

When next day Miss M'Dill carried out this intention, she was received at the door of Craig Manor by the strangest and most uncouth-looking butler she had ever seen, a species of magnified dwarf, upon whose high shoulders the carefully cut black coat tried in vain to lie smoothly, and who seemed rather painfully aware of the size of the hand with which he took her card.

"Mr. de Logez seems to have been a sportsman," was her reflection, as she was ushered through a hall tapestried with skins and bristling with horns. "And Madame owns artistic tastes, presumably," was her comment upon the drawing-room, down the length of which the uncouth butler still limped on

ahead. No trace of the *nouveau riche* anywhere. The stamp of long-established wealth could not well have been more successfully imitated.

"Fancy keeping a lame butler—he must be a *very* old family retainer, surely!" she reflected, as she stepped into a dimly lighted boudoir, all amber brocade and ebony tables.

From a *chaise longue* before the fireplace the new proprietress rose with alacrity and in a creamy-coloured tea-gown, which could not possibly be looked at indifferently by female eyes.

Miss M'Dill, while she wrung the small hand held towards her almost to the verge of pain, explained that to welcome the new-comer had seemed to her to be her pleasant neighbourly duty.

"It is *too* good of you!" murmured Madame de Logez, whose black eyes were dancing in quite undisguised delight. "I was beginning to think that Scotch friendliness had been greatly over-rated, and that I was going to be obliged to be a hermit against my will. In foreign countries it's the new-comer who takes the first step, you know; and once or twice during these lonely weeks—for they *have* been lonely—I was half tempted to try the foreign plan; but that would have shocked Scotch propriety horribly, would it not?"

"It would," confirmed Miss M'Dill, with pleasant bluntness. "Our Scotch propriety is an awful thing, and so is our Scotch caution. Unless we

know a person's great-grandfather, or at the very least his first cousin, we're always in a funk about compromising ourselves."

"Ah, I see. I ought to have brought my testimonials with me, as cooks do. How stupid of me not to think of it!—and will I have to go on playing the hermit until I have procured some, what did you call them?—references?"

She looked at her visitor with the face of a rueful child.

"No—certainly you won't!" beamed Miss M'Dill, hopelessly conquered. "Now that I've made the breach in the wall, they'll all follow like sheep—see if they don't! and once they've seen you and your rooms and your gowns—bless you!—they'll forget all about references, and so on. Why, that tea-gown in itself is an acquisition to St. Damian's!"

The stranger stretched out her hand again impulsively.

"*How* kind you are, and how grateful I am! If you knew how very little I have had of life yet you would not wonder at this thirst for distractions—for I *do* thirst for them, I don't deny it."

She sank her eyes, as she spoke, to the wonderfully embroidered little shoe which peeped from below the hem of her dress.

"But isn't St. Damian a funny place to look for them?" Miss M'Dill could not keep herself from asking.

"It is—a very funny place. But if you had lived

as long as I have among New York sky-scrapers you would understand my passion for ruins."

"I thought you came from California?"

"Oh yes, I do; but my husband had business in the North. He had Scotch ancestors too—on his mother's side—that is one of the reasons why I wanted to see Scotland; and as I wanted to see ruins too, I simply picked out the Scotch town which is the fullest of them. I am doing a *régime* of old walls and ivy, so to say."

"Craig Manor ought to suit you, then. Its walls are quite among the oldest—and also the thickest—in the place. It also figures honourably on our rather ample list of haunted houses."

Madame de Logez clapped her hands.

"A ghost? Have I actually got a ghost all of my own? What does it do?"

"It only makes noises, so far as I know—noises in the walls, which some people are blasphemous enough to attribute to rats. It's the room next this one which is the haunted room, I believe."

"Why, that's the very room I have chosen for my bedroom."

"Is it? I wonder you care to sleep on the ground-floor in such a damp place as this. There are plenty of rooms upstairs."

"Yes, there are, but I hate stairs, and the room is panelled, and I love panels. In fact, it just happens to suit me!" she laughed, looking her visitor straight in the eyes.

"In spite of the ghost?"

"Because of the ghost! I tell you that I adore ghosts."

"Well, personally, I hope that your *régime* will agree with you for a good while; but whether the rest of the womenkind will second my wish, I somewhat doubt."

"Why should they not?"

"Because you're too good-looking not to make enemies," blurted out Miss M'Dill. "They'll all be trembling for their admirers."

Madame de Logez broke into a peal of tinkling laughter.

"Ah, *how* awfully amusing! Oh, dear Miss M'Dill, please reassure them! Tell them that I am as harmless as a babe—that all I want is to amuse myself—to dance, to sing, to live! And as for their admirers—let them make their minds easy! I'm not dreaming—not *dreaming* of marrying!"

"She must have been very unfortunate in her first experience," said Miss M'Dill to herself, noting the energy with which the words were spoken. But aloud she playfully remarked:

"Ah, come, you mustn't say that. This would be a little too hard upon all our promising bachelors, and we've got quite a fair show of them too."

"Of boys, you mean. I'm told that the strong sex is here represented by professors whose hair has stopped growing, and by undergraduates whose moustaches have not yet begun to do so."

"What a calumny! And all the golf-players that come flocking to our links?"

"But those aren't natives, usually."

"We've got natives too. There are plenty of country-houses within easy reach, and some of them own sons."

"Who are either in London or the colonies?"

"Not all. There are the two Margisons at home, and always ready for any fun that's up; and then there's Mr. Kennedy of Ecclesrigg, a man whose clear duty it is to marry."

"Who is Mr. Kennedy?" asked Madame de Logez, playing with the lace upon her gown.

Miss M'Dill concisely gave the desired information.

"And he, too, is ready for any fun that is up?"

"No; that he is not. He has spent years in the gold-fields, and came back a perfect bear—in fact, he was that before he went. But bears can be tamed, after all, and we're all rather hoping that someone will take him in hand. It's hard upon us, you see, having the chief house of the neighbourhood as good as shut up. Geoffrey used to have such nice luncheon parties during the shooting season, and the old men's dinners were renowned."

"Oh, I see. And have you selected the young lady who is to act as bear-tamer, and re-open the doors of Eccles—Eccles—"

"Ecclesrigg. There are half a dozen willing for

the office, but they don't get a chance, since he never shows anywhere, not even on the golf-links, though he used to be a great golfer in old days."

"And is he anything else besides a golfer? A sportsman, perhaps?"

"Yes; a keen sportsman, and a still keener boatsman. Ecclesrigg is as close to the beach as this house is, right on the other side of the bay—I believe you ought to see it from the upper windows here—and it seems that he spends half his time out at sea, in a double-oar boat, quite alone. Sometimes he gets home so late at night that the servants have begun to look for his corpse on the strand—for hardly any weather stops him. William Kennedy always *was* queer, even as a boy."

"He sounds quite terrible," said Madame de Logez, with a slight grimace.

"He is a little terrible. But Ecclesrigg is a delightful place, all the same. And," added Miss M'Dill, rather more reflectively, and with her eyes upon the beautiful stranger's face, "anyone who succeeded in paring his claws would earn the eternal gratitude of St. Damian's."

"Why shouldn't *she* be the one to re-open Ecclesrigg?" the spinster was inwardly debating. "Her money and his house ought to combine into a quite ripping social centre. And she looks, too, as though she would be good at paring claws!"

Left alone, Madame de Logez lay down again upon her *chaise longue* and reflected deeply for some

minutes. Then she touched the electric bell by her side.

"Brown," she said to the grotesque butler who almost instantaneously appeared upon the threshold, "is there a boat in the boat-house?"

"There is, Missy, but it's in an awfu' condaytion."

"You are not to call me Missy, Brown, I have told you so before. I am Madame de Logez. Order a new boat at once, a light sort of boat, you know—suitable for a lady. I am going to learn to row."

CHAPTER XV

SALTED APPLES

IT was a busy day upon the shore. Two days back an apple-boat had foundered at the mouth of the bay, and all along the strand the red-cheeked fruit lay as thick among the sea-weed wreaths as though they were the natural products of their glistening sprays; and still they came riding in upon the top of the gentle swell, to which the storm had subsided. Half the female and all the infant population seemed to have turned out, and both baskets and aprons, and even sacks, had been put into requisition, in order to bring the unlooked-for harvest under cover. Several hundredweights of apples in April, even slightly "salted" apples, were not a thing to be despised, by either careful housewives or greedy infants. Even the stronger sex—to judge from various bearded persons in blue jerseys, whose boats drifted about the bay, while they sprawled over the sides, armed with hand-nets, whose normal employment was the capture of shrimps, but which now came up bending under much heavier ware—were not quite above the temptation of this feast spread upon the waters.

But among the clumsy fishing-craft there stood

out conspicuously one skiff of lighter make—the elegantly-built and dazzlingly white boat in which the new proprietress of Craig Manor indulged her passion for the sea. It must be a new-born passion, St. Damian decided, watching the way in which she handled her oars. But under the tuition of the lame butler, who seemed to be a person of the most many-sided accomplishments—this changed so rapidly that at the end of a week already she was seen to venture out alone, weather permitting, though never beyond the precincts of the sheltering bay.

She was beginning to know it by heart already: the crescent of sand melting into the links behind the rocky headlands pushed out to sea—the gulls wheeling against the grey sky—to know it, and also to be a little tired of it. Did not her arms ache with the number of strokes she had rowed upon its grey-green surface—which for two weeks she had been haunting, with no result except blistered hands?

To achieve the beginning of an acquaintance was almost too much to be hoped for, but to get her boat within what she defined to herself as “scouting” distance of the Ecclesrigg boat, had not appeared to Madame de Logez, otherwise Elvira Cameron, to be “unfeasible.” Before opening the actual campaign, she felt the need of first reconnoitring the enemy—of getting familiar with the features of the man with whom she was going to struggle. There seemed no other meeting-ground but the bay—and yet the bay had failed her so far.

From the upper windows of Craig Manor it was quite possible, with a good field-glass, to distinguish not only the red walls of Ecclesrigg upon the rocks, but even to pick out the landing-stage below, and follow the movements of the boat which was tethered there — rarely idle for two days running. The habits and hours of the Master of Ecclesrigg were familiar to her by this time, and yet, calculate as she would, she had never obtained more than a distant glimpse of that boat, and of the dark figure that bent over the oars—all the more assiduously, it would seem, when any other craft was in the neighbourhood. Surely he must be the least inquisitive of men, since it was impossible that he should not have seen her, and since the mere sight of a woman alone in a boat—and such a conspicuous boat too—should be enough to arouse curiosity. Upon curiosity she had counted a good deal—apparently in vain.

To-day again he had escaped her. She knew it, having seen the boat with the solitary figure run out into the open, whither she dared not follow.

These solitary cruises could not but strengthen her convictions. It was almost the typical mode of action of the undetected yet remorse - stricken criminal—but, for all that, it was very inconvenient.

“I shall have to try some other way,” she decided. “There’s no sense in ruining my hands for nothing. What shall it be? Shall I get a motor, and make it

run into his front door? I had better go home and think about it. Oh, what a beauty!"

The beauty was a particularly big and particularly red-cheeked apple, which at that very moment came bump against the side of the boat. In an instant Elvira's bare hand had clutched it. As she sat up again her eyes fell upon a second apple, a third and fourth—upon dozens of them, dancing cheerfully along, like a shoal of some strange kind of fish.

"So that is what those men are fishing for—and the children on the shore too, I suppose. Oh, what a lot! This *is* fun!"

Having hastily shipped her oars, Elvira stretched eager hands towards the tantalising apples, most of which were bobbing past with what looked like mocking curtsies, just out of reach.

A minute ago she had been a manœuvring woman; abruptly she had been transformed into a child as young as any of those on the shore, whose grimy fingers were picking the apples out of the wet sand. The idea of an immediate return home was tacitly dropped. For an hour the mistress of Craig Manor catered as assiduously for the salted apples as though she meant to make her living by selling them in the market-place.

When at length she paused to take breath, she was no longer quite the same decorous person who had left Craig Manor that afternoon. The sleeves of her perfectly-cut tailor's gown were drenched, in spite of having been, for convenience' sake, rolled

up to the elbow, and her black hair, so carefully dressed this morning, now tumbled wildly about her shoulders, owing to the loss of most of her hair-pins.

But her ardour was not yet damped.

"If only I had a hand-net," she earnestly considered. "A few inches would make all the difference. I wonder if I couldn't get one of those men to lend me one? Where are they all gone to? Dear me, how far out I am already. I suppose the tide has turned. Ah, there is one of them."

Yes; there undoubtedly was one of them, not fifty yards off, but rowing hard and in an opposite direction. Even through the first veil of dusk she could plainly see how the coarse jersey upon his broad back strained with each one of his vigorous strokes.

"Ho!" she shouted. "Ho! Lend a hand here!"

But the strokes continued regularly, and the boat drew away.

She improvised a speaking-trumpet with her hands, and repeated her call. Then, as he did not even turn his head, she grew angry and sprang to her feet.

"Here, you boor!" she cried, in a voice whose imperiousness pierced the air—"you great Scotch boor! Don't you hear that I want you?"

At this at last he turned his head, and then, very slowly, his boat. Almost imperceptibly the distance between them diminished—he was no longer rowing with the vigorous strokes of a minute ago. A big, black-bearded man, in a blue jersey and a fisherman's

cap, and with what she mentally put down as a "hang-dog" look.

"What do you want?" he asked gruffly, as soon as speaking distance was reached.

"You might have been a little quicker about asking that, I think," she said, with the red of anger still flaming in her cheeks, for to be disregarded by the strong sex—to whichever class it might belong—was a new and distasteful experience. "You're either deaf, or else you're quite the most disobliging man I've come across yet."

"I'm not deaf," he curtly stated.

"Then you're the other thing."

She glanced at him with a trifle of surprise as she said it, for he did not speak with the broad Scotch accent which she had instinctively expected. It was also rather astonishing that he had not touched his cap with a red forefinger, in the fashion she had grown familiar with.

"I require a hand-net—one of those little landing-nets," you know," she loftily explained. "You have probably got one in your boat. Will you lend it me, please?—hire it to me, I mean?—for, of course, I shall pay you for it."

He had not given her a single straight look yet, being one of those people to whom straight looks always seem to cost an effort, but now he stared, and the stare was followed by the fragment of a laugh, quickly suppressed.

"I don't hire out nets," he said, as roughly as before.

"I'll pay you well—I really will," she persisted.

"I haven't got a net."

"But haven't you been after the apples?"

"Which apples?"

"Why, those that are all about. Look what a lot I've got, even without a net. And you?"

The boats were close enough now for Elvira, by craning her neck, to peer over into the neighbouring craft. Not a single apple met her eye there. Instead, they fell upon the fisherman's boots, and remained riveted there in a mixture of wonder and alarm. From these they moved rapidly to the hands that grasped the oars—it is always in the extremities that class differences betray themselves—then back again to the feet. The boots were in themselves a revelation. That a gentleman should wear a blue jersey was much more thinkable than that a fisherman should wear boots of that make.

She was still telling herself so when the boats bumped against each other and then drew apart with the recoil of the shock. As they did so, some big, glaringly white letters painted upon the bow of the boat alongside came directly under her eye. E-C-C-L-E- she was able to make out, the rest of the designation disappearing round the bow.

She threw one swift glance at his face, mentally comparing him with some picture in her mind, and then she only just stopped short of slapping herself on the forehead with the flat of her hand.

"What a bat I am!" ran the inner apostrophe. "Why, it's *he*, all the time!"

CHAPTER XVI

THE FISHERMAN

HER first feeling—contrary to her own expectations—was neither triumph nor pleasure, but rather a momentary terror.

“Johnnie’s murderer! This, then, is Johnnie’s murderer!” was all she could coherently think for a moment, as she scanned the heavy lines and somewhat unwholesome pallor of his face. Nervously she glanced about her, as though to see whether no one else were within call.

There was no one. She was alone with the dreaded man, whom she had so yearned to meet. And in less than a minute the terror was past, and another feeling succeeded: a feeling of sharp annoyance as she angrily became aware of her disordered appearance. So long as she had seen a St. Damian fisherman before her, the defects of her toilet had not disturbed her; but to be caught drenched and untidy by the man whom she had intended to dazzle at the very first meeting, for whose benefit she had intended to enlist all the resources of the dressing-room—this was a little past endurance.

Impatiently she began to pluck at her wet sleeves,

in the endeavour to pull them into place. But it was no easy proceeding, seeing that they had been rolled up as tight as they would go ; and while she was so occupied, she could not but be aware of the sidelong look of his ill-humoured eyes. He was not blind, then—that was evident. He would have almost needed to be that to be looking in any other direction at that moment, since arms of this perfection of shape and of whiteness are not generally to be seen by broad daylight.

In a flash she realised this, and began simultaneously to wonder whether her tumbled hair was really more unbecoming than a carefully-dressed *coiffure* could have been. To anything but triumphant beauty it would probably be fatal, but Elvira knew her beauty to be independent of such smallness of circumstances.

With the thought all her coolness returned. So rapid had been the passage of emotions that the man in the boat alongside had not had time to wonder at her momentary silence.

“ If they won’t come down they must just stay up,” she laughed, and calmly taking off her cap, raised her arms, still bare to the elbow, towards her head, and began by deliberately shaking out the masses of her magnificent hair, preparatory to twisting it into a knot.

Her companion, resting upon his oars, sat with brows down-drawn, his face towards her, his eyes not visible, but the immobility of his attitude betraying that sort of attention that borders on astonishment.

"If you haven't been after the apples, then, I wonder what you have been after?" remarked Elvira airily, having already formed her plan of action. "Herrings, perhaps, or—or mackerel? I'm very badly up in fishing-lore, I'm afraid. But you haven't got any fishing-tackle at all that I can see. I do believe you've been idling away the whole afternoon. Is this fair upon your wife and children, whose bread, of course, you've got to earn?"

She shook her head at him with mock severity, as she commenced to make a rope of her hair.

At that he stirred out of his immobility, like a man who has suddenly remembered something, and without a word bent again to his oars.

"Wait a moment!" cried Elvira sharply. "I've got something else to say."

"Well?" he ungraciously inquired.

"Even though you won't or can't hire me a net, you might hire me something else."

"What?"

"Your two arms."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing so dreadful that you need glower at me so, my good man. Only that I've discovered that my own arms are aching horribly from the apple hunt, and that I am altogether far too tired to row myself home. Do it for me, and I will pay you so well that your wife won't need to reproach you for anything."

"I don't want any money," he growled.

"Well, we'll settle about that later ; meanwhile, I certainly do want your services."

"I don't believe you do ; you're quite a good oar yourself."

"Ah, then he *has* noticed me," was her exultant thought, as aloud she said indifferently :

"When I'm not tired, yes ; but I can't row another stroke to-day. If you've got only the shadow of a conscience in you, you cannot leave me to my fate. The tide is going out, and as you see, I shall never be able to make way against it. It's your duty as a fellow-man to help me."

"I can't row two boats," he said, plainly wavering.

"But you can row one and tow the other, can't you ? It will be a slow process, of course, but I have time to spare," she added sweetly.

He shifted on his seat, casting one glance to the right and another to the left, as though in search of some means of escape.

"Where do you live ?" he asked at last, as though speaking against his will.

"At Craig Manor ; over there, to the right of the bay."

Without any further word of acquiescence he began, with the same expression of ill-humour, to look about him for a rope. In another minute the little white boat was securely fastened to the big brown one. In yet another Elvira was watching the straining blue jersey upon the broad back before her, and counting the regular fall of the dripping

oars. If he had hoped by his position to crush all further attempt at conversation he had made a mistake. Elvira's interest in fishing statistics, as well as in the habits of the sea-board population generally, proved so great that in order to give even the curtest answers to the questions put to him, the rower had no choice but to glance back over his shoulder at least once in a minute. Whether this glance comprised a vision of the slim figure in the grey tweed, whose hair was now back in its place, and the whiteness of whose arms were discreetly covered by the damp sleeves—(it would not do to be too lavish in such treats as this, Elvira decided)—it would have been hard to say; but nothing, at any rate, could save him from the consciousness of its presence, nor from the sound of the bell-clear voice in which the questions were put.

The ungraciousness of the answers seemed powerless to discourage her thirst for knowledge; nor did the rather glaring ignorance of the supposed fisherman appear to disturb her in the least. He had at last grasped his rôle, and aware, doubtless, of its convenience, was playing it to the best of his abilities.

"It is all so new to me," she explained, with charming apology. "I am quite a stranger here."

"How long have you been?" he inquired, with that same obvious reluctance of speech which had struck her before.

"Only about two months; and I love studying

the habits of a place, but the language is the usual difficulty. You're the first of the St. Damian people whose accent hasn't beat me."

He said nothing, but jerked his head back, and rowed on more vigorously than ever.

The outline of the bay was beginning to melt into the shadows and vapours of evening, while every few minutes a new light twinkled up along the shore-line. The dip of the oars, the lapping of the water against the sides of the tethered boats, the wail of the now invisible gulls, filled the ever-growing pauses.

"If he has any imagination at all, this ought to appeal to it," reflected Elvira, with her hands clasped about her knees, and a confident smile playing around her lips. "It's a pity I couldn't get him to face me; but it's no great matter either, since I'm sure he sees me quite plainly with the back of his head."

In spite of the dusk the Craig Manor landing-stage was very neatly made; but just before it was made Elvira had another idea. For the last few minutes she had been gazing down pensively at the thin gold chain bracelet which she wore on her right wrist. They were close to land when she touched the clasp, and bending forward, tossed the little chain neatly over into the front boat, where it fell with no perceptible sound upon the rough boards, behind the unconscious rower's back.

Within the same minute the foremost boat touched the pilots of the landing-stage.

"Wait a moment. I will call someone to help you with the chains," she said, rising quickly. "Give me your hand."

"I don't want any help," he said, with some precipitation.

"Give me your hand!" she imperiously repeated, and he obeyed, as sullenly as ever.

A very slight shudder ran over her as their fingers touched—was this the hand that had put the knife into Johnnie's heart?—but she steadied herself immediately, and stepped deftly from one boat to the other.

"And you are sure you will take no payment?" she asked, turning again as soon as her foot had touched firm ground.

"Quite sure!"

"Are all St. Damian people as proud as that?" she asked, forcing him to meet her innocently questioning gaze. "And is hiring oneself out as a boatman worse than selling fish?"

Without a word he turned back to the boat.

"Then all I can do for to-day is to thank you, I suppose. But," she laughed gaily, "I will find out where you live, see if I don't—and I'll tip your children, if you've got any. *They* won't be above taking sixpences, I'm sure! Now just wait till I send someone to help you!"

By the time someone came he was gone already, as she knew he would be; but on Elvira's face there was no disappointment as she regained her own

apartments. The lights, both in the big drawing-room and in her own boudoir, were turned on already, but she walked straight through them to the bedroom alongside. Her eyes were shining brilliantly as she stopped before the tall, narrow mirror which, in the centre of a stretch of wall between two windows, replaced the oak panelling of the rest of the apartment, being in itself a panel embedded in the wood. It was a long and critical look she gave herself, before turning away, first to lock both the doors of her room and then to unlock a small cupboard in a corner. From here she produced an object which, considering the brilliancy of the incandescent gas, looked ridiculously superfluous: a small, dark lantern carefully trimmed, which she proceeded to light with a touch of impatient haste. With the lantern in her hand, she again approached the mirror.

That evening the mistress of Craig Manor was unusually late of appearance.

"She must have gone to sleep," said the newly engaged maid, in some distress, to the butler. "I've been twice to the door with the hot water; but I can't get her to hear. What shall I do, Mr. Brown?"

"Leave her alone, bedad!" ordered Brown, turning angrily upon the girl. "As though the pore lady hadn't a roight to slape when it plazes her! And if Missy—if Madame Dellorgus chooses to take her victuals at midnight, what business is that of yours or mine, indade?"

It was not midnight, but only nine o'clock when Madame de Logez sailed into her dining-room, with eyes that had lost nothing of their brilliancy, perhaps in consequence of the refreshing slumber.

For two days Elvira waited quietly ; on the third she sat down deliberately to her writing-table and wrote the following note :

"CRAIG MANOR, 16th April, 189—.

"DEAR MR. KENNEDY,—I am horrified at my mistake, and cannot rest until I have made the apology which I feel to be your due. I cannot remember every word I said, but I am afraid I have been very rude, and I have a dim recollection of having called you a boor. I'm sure I deserve a much worse appellation. It's the fault of the blue jersey, of course—but it's also a little your own fault. If people like to masquerade as fishermen, they ought not really to complain of being treated as fishermen. Your accent *did* puzzle me ; but my ignorance of the country must plead for me. Subsequent inquiries have cleared up the matter beyond doubt. I *told* you, you will remember, that I would find out where you live—and I have done so—with a vengeance !

"Hoping you will forgive my stupid mistake.—
Yours sincerely,

"ELVIRA DE LOGEZ.

"P.S.—I miss a small gold chain bracelet I was wearing on Wednesday. It is not in my boat. Please have it looked for in yours. It may have slipped off as you handed me over."

"Now," commented Elvira as she sealed the note, "if he wants a pretext, he has got one."

The "subsequent inquiries" were genuine. Not the shadow of a doubt remained as to the identity of the man in the blue jersey and the London-made boots.

During the next few days there was no rowing in the bay, and no excursions beyond the garden for the mistress of Craig Manor. The wet weather which had set in may have had something to do with this, but a strained and nervous expectation evidently had more. A great deal of time was spent at the upper windows with a field-glass. But after two days this was abandoned.

"Can I have failed?" she asked herself, on the fourth and wettest of the days since her last excursion, as she cowered shiveringly in a deep chair before a roaring fire. The depressing atmosphere had for the moment extinguished her habitual optimism. "Can I have failed, after all? Until he sends back the bracelet I won't believe it. The way he looked, and even the way he avoided looking!"

She sat up suddenly, the thought cut short by a peal of the door-bell. A visitor on such a day as this?—was it likely?

Already the halting step of the butler was crossing the drawing-room, with another step behind it.

"Mr. Kaynedy," announced Brown upon the threshold, in a voice admirably void of expression.

CHAPTER XVII

THE CAMPAIGN

BETWEEN the day on which the lame butler made this momentous announcement and that other day on which Professor Annicker pointed out the Californian widow to his colleague as one of the "sights" of St. Damian, there lay a year and more—a year of tacit but intense struggle between two wills—that of a determined and high-strung woman, and that of a strong and stubborn man, who, even vanquished by passion, still presented a front of dogged, though passive, resistance.

Up to a certain point, Elvira's plan had worked admirably; beyond that point there had come a check. The wet afternoon on which he had brought her back her bracelet had proved decisive. He had expressly said that he would not return, but she knew that he would, and he did, against his own express resolve, it would seem, yet ever more frequently and irresistibly. Almost immediately she had gauged the man she had to deal with, and became the more sanguine of success. But though very soon she was aware of having awakened in him one of those violent attachments in which his hot-

headed nature evidently inclined—(where was Bella's doll-like picture now beside this glowing reality?)—she simultaneously became conscious of an equally violent opposition. Dumb adoration, however obvious, would never serve her purpose. If she was ever to obtain possession of the ring upon which hung the proof she required, something more definite must be reached. She had told Dick long ago that it might have to play the part of an engagement ring, and she knew now that it was the only possible part for it to play. A hundred times during the year that was past she had seen the declaration she coveted trembling upon her enemy's lips, only to be forcibly thrust back and once more tightly locked behind his obstinately closed teeth.

Once, early in their acquaintance, she had heard him put his own point of view into words whose plainness was unimpeachable. It was Miss M'Dill, who, quite against her own desire, had provoked their utterance.

She had stumbled upon Kennedy alone in Elvira's boudoir, and on the point of accompanying her to the golf-links. In the elation produced by what she considered to be the promising development of events, the optimistic spinster had not been able to resist one little remark of a vaguely congratulatory nature.

"You're getting more like other people, William," she beamed upon the man she had known since

boyhood. "We'll be seeing the gates of Ecclesrigg swing back presently, will we not?"

Miss M'Dill was not easily staggered, but even she felt a slight shock as Kennedy turned upon her with a white, angry face.

"I know what you mean—but that's all madness," he said, with an almost savage emphasis. "In my lifetime that gate will not swing back, for I mean to die single—do you hear? You're welcome to tell all your inquisitive friends so, if you like."

And he laughed derisively.

Elvira, dressed for the links, was just pushing aside the heavy curtain over the doorway as the last words were spoken, but she came forward as unconcernedly as though she had heard nothing—while poor Miss M'Dill went home dumbfounded, and with her visions of social gatherings all tumbling about her ears.

"That dog-in-the-manger little widow is going to have it her own way after all, it would seem," she angrily reflected. "If I was William, I would marry for the mere sake of spiting her. And how white he gets when he is angry, to be sure! Looks almost as if he had got the family heart."

Elvira's review of the situation was very much calmer. She had guessed something of this, and it tallied, too, with her estimate of things. A man with blood-guilt upon him generally shrinks from founding a family. The mere fact of this reluctance, expressed with a vehemence which, to the uninitiated

Miss M'Dill, had appeared superfluous, was to her a fresh proof—had she required such—of the existence of that guilt. This attitude meant that the struggle was going to be harder than she had supposed. Well, then, she would put out more of her powers, that was all. And with this thought in her mind she had set her teeth and so vigorously driven off her golf-ball, that for the first time in her experience she successfully cleared a certain deceitful bunker which played the part of trap to all beginners.

The links supplied a large proportion of the battle-field. To appeal to a man's superior knowledge of anything is infallibly to appeal to his vanity, as she could not help knowing, and vanity is a mighty ally of passion, as she more guessed than knew. The boudoir *tête-à-têtes* required to be diversified, were it only for decorum's sake, and the bay was not available in all weathers. Hence the inevitable development of a craving for golf in "Madame de Logez." Her craving for society was not, for that, neglected. Dinner parties and garden parties, dances and picnics, succeeded each other almost as regularly as the beads upon a rosary. They could not bring her nearer her object, since Kennedy steadily shunned all social gatherings, but they served partly as sops thrown to the curiosity of St. Damian—since it was safer to have them chattering about her gowns and her decorations than about herself—partly as bribes for sympathies which might yet prove useful.

It had been a strenuous year; and despite the intensity of her vitality, the strain was beginning to tell. Until now the excitement of the chase had kept her callous to all considerations but the sole one of success—the very resistance she encountered seeming but to stimulate her energy. But reaction was not far off. A distasteful task, in order to be bearable, should be rushed through, with no leisure for reflection, no space for nice analysis—and this one was beginning to drag. And another element, too, had entered into the matter: an element of repulsion—for the more she saw of the man with whom she had to deal, the more was she repelled by the evidence of a gross and low-toned nature, devoid of all true tenderness, of all higher aspirations. His glances were as hard to bear as the touch of his hand. To smile at him in such moments was only made possible by thinking hard—ah, so hard!—of another face, and a future delivered of intrigue.

Even her nerves were beginning to suffer. If they were not to break down, the crisis would have to be precipitated—the tacit struggle be brought to an end one way or the other.

This point had never been so clear to her as on the day when the Professor of Mineralogy recognised her on the links. Yet, as presently she came sauntering back with a caddy behind her and her companion by her side, her face betrayed nothing beyond a rather feverish brilliancy of the eye.

Just beside the little wooden shanty where soda-

water, besides other things, was dispensed, she caught sight of a familiar face and nodded smilingly to Professor Annicker. He came forward with another person beside him, who, somewhat to her astonishment, likewise lifted his hat.

"I scarcely venture to claim acquaintance," jerked out this small and spasmodic personage; "indeed, it was scarcely to be called an acquaintance; but perhaps you remember — on board the *Benata*, nearly three years ago. We were table neighbours; I had the pleasure of some conversation with you."

Elvira was scanning his wizened countenance with blank eyes. Very slowly something like recognition dawned in their deepest depth, and at the same time she coloured violently all over her face.

"Of course you can scarcely be expected to remember," Professor Merritt hastily and apologetically explained, as she still stood dumb before him. "A lapse of memory on *my* part would have been unpardonable, but on yours, madame—"

He drew up his shoulders and spread out his hands in a gesture evidently meant to be complimentary.

"Yes; I remember quite well," said Elvira, having by a violent effort regained her self-control, and speaking with a deliberate slowness which gave her time further to collect her thoughts. She had done no more than throw one instinctive glance at her companion, and now kept her eyes steadily upon the Professor's face. "You were to investigate the composition of the gold-fields, were

you not? and I was going to satisfy my curiosity. It was the fashionable thing to do then, you know."

"And was it satisfied? Or did the Klondyke disappoint you?"

Elvira was conscious of a movement beside her, but her eyes never moved from the Professor's face.

"It was a horrible disappointment," she said, with a sort of airy ruefulness. "I had expected to find lumps of gold lying about, whereas there wasn't even gold dust upon my clothes when I brushed them out. The only amusing part was the masquerading. I gave myself out as a lady-journalist—it's only lady-journalists who aren't considered to be mad on such occasions, you know."

"You played the part very well," remarked the Professor, a little watchfully.

"Did I? I'm *so* glad to hear it. You must come and see me, and tell me how you flourished with your ores. I'm dying to know, but my time is up."

She walked away with her companion beside her, leaving the small Professor still tingling with delight at the warmth of the pressure which his hand had received.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE BATTLE

DURING several minutes Kennedy walked in silence beside Elvira. His face, so far as she could see it without turning full towards him, had taken on another shade of that unpleasant pallor which characterised it, more especially in moments of emotion.

"I think I have had enough of golf for to-day," she said presently, carelessly swinging the club she still held. "It's lunch-time, as it is."

She handed the club to the caddy, at the same time changing her direction.

Kennedy followed her, making no comment. It was only a minute later that he said, with his habitual abruptness of utterance :

"You never told me that you had been to the Klondyke."

"Didn't I? Very likely not. I've been to lots of places that I may not have spoken of."

"An awfully rough place for a woman. Was your husband alive at the time?"

"Yes," said Elvira, gazing straight out to sea ;
"he was alive."

"I wonder he allowed it."

She laughed with an assumption of flippancy which had done her good service ere now.

"How do you know he did allow it? On the other side of the Atlantic wives have a habit of taking their own way. I'm fond of experiences, as you know. Would I be at St. Damian if I was not?"

"When were you there?"

"That old gentleman said it was three years ago, didn't he? I accept his dates, mine being always hopeless."

He fell back just perceptibly, and did not speak again immediately. When he did, it was still on the same subject that he harped.

"It must have been a very—unpleasant experience, surely," he said, in forced accents, which rendered his harsh voice even harsher than usual. "Miners are a rough lot—and such—strange things happen in gold-fields. You must have heard queer things talked about?" he persisted, his eyes hanging sideways on her face.

There was enough of suspicion in the glance to make her heart stand still for a moment—but only for a moment. The mere suggestion of a danger to her secret suddenly braced all her strength.

"Ah, yes, I heard plenty of horrors talked about; and if I had been the journalist I pretended to be, no doubt I would have gloated over them. But my curiosity was quite of another sort. I was very young still, you see, and a gold-field was to me really

something golden—a thing out of a fairy-tale, in fact; that was why I wanted to see it. Fairy-tales are so rare nowadays.”

He said nothing more for the present, and during the rest of the walk Elvira was free to choose her own topics, which she did with an appearance of *insouciance* which successfully masked her own agitation, and seemingly untroubled by the absence of response.

“You will come in to luncheon, will you not?” she asked, at the door of Craig Manor.

He appeared on the point of refusing, but meeting her eyes, in which invitation stood written broad, silently acquiesced.

The meal itself, taken in the presence of the lame butler, was flavoured by conversation as conventional as could be desired. It was not until the coffee had been brought into the amber boudoir that Elvira began to foresee a crisis of some sort.

Kennedy had been moodily stirring his coffee for far more time than a lump of sugar can possibly take to dissolve, before, looking up suddenly, he spoke.

“Why did you keep this thing from me?”

“What thing?” she asked, quickly overcoming the spasm of alarm which had touched her.

“That about having been at the Klondyke. It is not like you to make secrets.”

“Secrets!” She gazed at him with a marvellous counterfeit of blank wonder on her face. “Do you

call a secret everything which I don't happen to mention? Then I'm afraid that I'm compact of secrets."

And she laughed with a strain, which only his own disturbance kept him from marking.

"Yes; but so unusual an incident—for it is most strange and unusual," he insisted. "That you should not have mentioned this—"

"If the talk had ever turned to the gold-fields, no doubt I should have mentioned it; but I can't remember that it ever so turned."

"Between friends—such friends as we have become—all should be open."

"Should it indeed?"

With her elbows resting upon the cushioned sides of the deep chair in which she reclined, Elvira idly clasped and unclasped her small, be-ringed hands. Before sitting down to luncheon, she had exchanged her tweed costume for a flowing gown of brown velvet, upon which, at throat and waist, a more fiery tint flamed boldly. She knew better than most women that even a perfect gown in incongruous surroundings will never work its full effect. The tailor-made costume, so harmonious with the links, would in this ultra-feminine space have proved a square peg in a round hole.

From beneath her thick lashes she was reading Kennedy's face as carefully as though she hoped to discover there how much she might dare. And he, too, was examining her covertly, with a certain

mistrustful glance which she had seen ere now, but had always succeeded in charming away by an intensified call upon her powers.

"You have never told me your history," he said, after a moment of silence, and speaking with a sort of reckless resolve. "It must be interesting, surely, if it embraces many such incidents as this."

She met his eyes without flinching, feeling that the battle was engaged, and quite mistress of her nerves now.

"My history? Would it interest you? I can tell it you in a few words. I loved my husband, and I lost him. With him I lost my happiness. I live only to conquer back that happiness. That is my whole history."

Kennedy rose, with a restless movement, and, going to the fireplace, stood there, with his elbow on the chimney-piece, his hand supporting his dark head.

"Does that mean that, though you loved your husband, you would be capable of forgetting him?" he asked, in a deeply troubled voice.

"It means whatever you prefer to read into my words," she said, with a laugh which was meant to be provoking, and which visibly provoked.

"Then I prefer to believe that you did not really love him."

The look which went with the words sent the blood to Elvira's face. For a moment her self-control was in danger.

"Am I in a confessional?" she asked impatiently.
"Am I answerable to you for my antecedents?"

"Not if you do not trust me," muttered Kennedy, his eyes hanging passionately upon the face whose seduction was so vividly heightened by anger.

All at once the irritation left her, turning to cool resolve.

"And you?" she asked, meeting his glance full. "Do *you* trust me? Have you ever told me *your* history?—or have I ever pressed you to do so?"

She saw him shrink as though at the touch of some sharp point, while his pallor intensified in the usual significant way.

It was after a pause that he said hastily :

"It could not interest you. My history is like that of other men."

The very whiteness of his lips would have betrayed to her that he was lying, even if she had not known what his history was.

"Is it, indeed?" she asked, still holding him with her eyes. "Then I suppose I am mistaken."

"In what?"

"In fancying that you have had other experiences than most men—that you have gone through worse things—darker moments. At times I have imagined that you have the face of a man with a secret, and that if you could throw off the burden of that secret you would become another man."

She said it without a catch in her voice, though

her heart was beating fast at the audacity of her experiment.

He broke into a grating laugh, shifting his position at the same time, so as to avoid her eyes.

"What an imagination you Southerners have! Evidently sun-heat is the thing for breeding fancies."

Elvira continued to clasp and unclasp her hands in the same idle fashion, seemingly absorbed by the sparkle of her rings.

"What was that you said just now? That between friends all should be open? Were not those your words?"

"They may have been," he muttered.

"But you have changed your mind about it, have you not? and perhaps you are right. I think I agree with you. Being friends does not mean being each other's confessors, does it? In my opinion, there is only one relation in life which calls for the knocking down of all screens, the pulling aside of all curtains. And yet how few husbands and wives forego that 'secret garden,' of which we have heard so much!"

She said it in the most superficial of tones, still making playthings of her hands. But the words alone were enough.

For a minute he stood frowning at one of the vases on the chimney-piece, his eyes clinging to it as though to an anchor of safety, then slowly, reluctantly, they moved until they rested on the perfect lines of the figure that lay so deep back in the arm-chair, with the heavy velvet folds flowing

to the ground, the waist, bound by the flaming ribbon, girded as though with fire.

"Elvira," he said hoarsely.

She thrilled—or was it perhaps that she shivered? but her half-averted face gave no sign.

One step he made towards her, then checked himself violently, and turning with precipitation, left the room.

CHAPTER XIX

THE MIRROR PANEL

AFTER Kennedy had left her Elvira sat still for a little time, looking hard at the door through which he had disappeared. But in the moment that she roused herself she did so effectually.

Having touched the bell, she first gave an order to the lame butler, and then almost ran into her bedroom alongside. The first thing she here did, as on a former occasion, was to turn the keys in the locks of both doors. The next was to go to the corner cupboard and to take from it a key, as well as the little dark lantern, whose feeble flame, quickly kindled, looked, if possible, yet more pointless by broad daylight than it had done beneath the glare of incandescent gas.

With the lantern in her hand she walked straight to the tall mirror between the windows, which replaced the centre panel of the three covering this stretch of wall. But this time she did not stop to look at her own reflection. Passing the lantern into her left hand, she groped with impatient fingers along the raised edge in which the glass was set. After a moment they reached something which

appeared to be no more than a knot in the wood—one of those knots which mark the spot from which a branch has once sprung—sitting a trifle loose in its socket, perhaps owing to the shrinkage of the wood, but not in any way conspicuous. It yielded to the pressure of her finger. The sheet of glass first shivered, and then very slowly, with a muffled grating that might have been a groan, moved, sliding away gently behind the neighbouring panel, its progress hastened by Elvira's active assistance. To all intents and purposes it was a door, masking another quite unmistakable door, of rusty iron, this one, and studded with clump-headed nails. This she unlocked with the key in her hand, shivering a little at the whiff of tomb-like air which immediately met her. The lantern, thrust forward, revealed several steps, standing sharply at right angles to the door, cut in the thickness of the wall, and leading downwards into blackness. Gathering together her velvet skirts, Elvira, with an assurance which spoke of long practice, turned down these steps.

There were ten of them altogether. She counted then aloud, while her arms brushed sharply against the damp stones on each side, for even for her slight figure the space was only just passable. Having reached the last, the pressure on both sides abruptly ceased. She was no longer moving within the thickness of the wall, but had reached a low vaulted passage, which the rays of her lantern could not illuminate for more than a yard or so in

advance. Here she walked faster, and with perfect confidence, despite the mouldy atmosphere reeking with wet, and the threatening blackness which stretched before her, despite even an occasional rat scuttling away before the approaching light. Every now and then the passage turned, sometimes abruptly, but Elvira seemed so familiar with each change of direction that the lantern was almost superfluous.

She might have been walking for about fifteen minutes when the feeble rays disclosed another set of steps, only four of them this time, and leading apparently straight into a blank wall. Having mounted them, she held up the lantern so as to illuminate the ceiling; instead of the stone vault, its light now revealed rough boards, and upon one of the boards something that looked quite remarkably like the knob of an electric bell. Nor did it belie its appearance, as was testified by the shrill tinkle which followed upon the touch of her finger. Upon this improbable spot mediævalism and modernity appeared to touch hands. Could the dead monks who—with motives now as buried as they were themselves—had burrowed this tunnel, have heard the tinkle of that bell, it is possible that even in their graves they would have crossed themselves.

Not two minutes had passed before the trap-door above her ponderously lifted, and an anxious face peered over the edge.

"Elvira! at last! I was beginning to feel mad. Your hands, my love!"

In another moment she leaned against him, with his strong arms still around her.

It was under a doorway that they stood, the entrance to a very small space whose completely circular shape proclaimed a turret-chamber. The trap-door still gaping at their feet was exactly as circular and exactly as large as the turret itself, being, in fact, no more than the movable floor of the tiny, quaint apartment. Carrying the lantern before her—for the space was windowless—Dick Cameron led his wife first through several more nondescript spaces, then up some steps into the daylight of a kitchen whose windows looked on to a small enclosed yard. Here, obviously, some sort of meal was being prepared upon rather a primitive kitchen-range, and still more obviously, it was Dick Cameron in person who had been preparing it. With shirt-sleeves rolled up to his elbows, and drops of perspiration beading his brow, his golden curls powdered with flour, he stood before his wife a striking, if not an absolutely imposing, figure. The very hands with which he had lifted her through the trap-door had only very recently left the flour-bin, as the marks on the ill-used brown velvet clearly proved.

"Mercy, Dick, what *are* you after?" asked Elvira, hovering, despite her trouble of mind, on the verge of laughter.

"Scones," said Dick doggedly. He had aged

somewhat during the last year, and he had lost much of his fresh colour; but his shoulders still looked broad enough to carry a good deal of trouble. "I am making scones for tea. Surely that's an innocent amusement enough? I'm trying to get into Mrs. Wilson's skin, since apparently I can't get back into Dick Cameron's. I'm sure Mrs. Wilson would make golumptious scones; and unless I'm to go crazy, I've got to do something, don't you see? And the fishing-tackle and the poker-work, and all the rest of it, are played out. Why, if half of the flies I've mounted are taken, I should depopulate all the trout streams in Scotland; and I'm blest if I know what further article of furniture I'm to operate upon. The kitchen dresser itself is a picture gallery by this time." This with a tragical gesture towards the object in question, upon whose deal surfaces birds of wonderful plumage, and with apparently dislocated limbs, disported themselves among plants of hitherto unclassified species. "All these are sterile efforts—breadless art," explained Dick, returning resolutely to the flour-bin. "I've decided to go in for cooking instead—scientific cooking, I mean—not the mere miner's fare that I've been content with till now. In this way, at least, I shall have my meals to look forward to, if nothing else—at least, I hope that I shall be able to look forward to them," he added, with a questioning glance towards the dough which he had been kneading into rags. "In default of the spirit, which is condemned

to chafe, I mean to pamper the flesh. Ha! my purveyors will change their minds about Mrs. Wilson's supposed avarice when they find orders for goose-livers and fresh lobsters lying in the basket on the steps!"

"And are you quite sure you never let them catch a glimpse of you at the windows?" asked Elvira anxiously.

"Quite sure, my love. When Dick Cameron does a thing, he does it whole. But, d—— it, Elvira—is this farce to go on for much longer?"

He looked at her with a haggard appeal, which sat comically upon his richly floured face.

It was the very question which Elvira had been putting to herself all day.

That it should have gone on even as long as this was almost a miracle.

That day in New York on which Brown had laid before her the plan of the underground passage connecting Fifty-two Bower Street with Craig Manor, unsuspected even by the present owners, and known only to the scattered remnants of the band of forgers, had proved the turning-point of Elvira's scheme. The passage alone would have been enough to fire her imagination. She had read of underground passages without quite believing in them—chiefly in penny dreadfuls. To discover one existing, and in full working-order, at the end of the nineteenth century was an anachronism which appealed alike to her sense of the picturesque and to the immortal

child within her, who, at the mere mention of sliding panels and disguised trap-doors, instantly scented a sort of magnified game of hide-and-seek.

Since that day Chance had worked into Elvira's hands in that particular way which Chance has of doing with regard to people who, in addition to a strong purpose, also happen to possess money. The purchase of the two houses, effected under two separate names, had been a question of money alone—and not even of overmuch money, since neither stood in good repute as dwelling-places. Neither had the smuggling of Dick into the House of Riddles been fraught with insuperable difficulties. But the keeping him quiet when once he was there!

The discovery of new and harmless occupations for the prisoner was one of the things that kept Elvira awake at night—generally to no purpose; since a musical instrument, even of the harmonica tribe, had been condemned as too dangerously apt to attract attention, and since the suggestion made by the incorrigible Brown, who more than once assured his master that nothing in the "whorld" was so absorbing as a good printing-press capable of turning out so-and-so many dozen of bank-notes in an hour, had been met with an indignation which the Irishman was constitutionally unable to appreciate.

It would, therefore, have only been natural if the new-born culinary passion had been greeted by Elvira with delight. But to-day preoccupation had the upper hand.

"I don't believe it *can* go on for much longer," she said now. "Oh, Dick—I don't know what is going to happen. I got such a fright to-day."

And rapidly she told him of her meeting with Professor Merritt, and the recognition that had ensued.

"I staved it off as well as I could, but I can't see that he is suspicious. There has always been a spice of mistrust in his attitude, and to-day's incident has of course heightened it incalculably. Sometimes he looks at me as though he were on the point of asking: 'Who are you? What do you want with me?' He is afraid of me, and yet he cannot keep away from me. Dick, tell me, do you believe in hypnotism?"

"Never troubled my head about it," said Dick, grimly stamping out the scones with the lid of a tin canister.

"At times I feel as though there were a touch of that in the way my will works upon his. It is a little like a person walking open-eyed into a net. Of course he never dreams that I am *I*; but he seems occasionally to be visited by the thought that I suspect his awful secret. It is rather sickening to watch. I must hurry up the end—I *must*! Jael's job was nothing to mine, I tell you. To run a nail through a man's brain would be child's play in comparison to this constant spinning of threads. Besides, he might escape us yet, now that he suspects me, and with him would escape all our future, all our happiness! No; no, he shall *not* escape me!"

Springing up, she began to pace the kitchen floor, her hands clenched by her sides, and upon her face that almost savage resolve before which Dick himself had quailed on a certain day in New York.

"I have thought of hurrying on matters by making him jealous. I would only have to choose among all the undergraduates of all the colleges, but I am afraid. There is so much of elementary violence in his nature that I should almost fear to provoke a second crime. His impulses seem all but irresistible. To-day, not an hour ago, he had very nearly yielded to one of them. I thought I held him fast already. He was coming towards me ready to fall at my feet, when with a wrench he stopped himself and left me."

Dick dashed down the girdle upon the fireplace with a recklessness which sent several scones flying.

"Elvira, I can't stand this any longer! He shall *not* fall at your feet—I will not suffer it. The thought of each hour you pass in that man's society is burning my heart out of me. Rather than let it continue, I shall walk out into the light of day and take my chance of human justice."

It was not the first similar crisis which Elvira had had to smother, but perhaps it was the most violent. Many minutes, and more caresses than was quite favourable to the turning of the scones, were required to calm the latest outburst of rebellion, and to extract the promise of a little more patience.

"Only a very little, Dick; I feel myself that it

cannot last. I shall find a way—be sure of that—but I am not going to think about it now, I am thinking about something quite else. Do you know what? I am thinking that it is very long since we had a walk, and that the moon is full to-night."

These nightly excursions had been the brightest spots in the year that was past. Horribly imprudent, of course, and fraught with innumerable risks of discovery, and perhaps for this very reason irresistible to two young people whom circumstances had forcibly kept at the honeymoon stage of feeling. Dick's health alone imperiously demanded an occasional outing, as Elvira, in self-justification, told herself; and since he could not show himself by daylight, what alternative was there but moonlight walks, sometimes along the strand, which they would reach unobserved through the Craig Manor gardens; at others, among the ruins with which the very streets of St. Damian abounded, each escapade being spiced with the half-fearful glee of a couple of youthful truants. These were the brief moments during which Elvira was able to throw off the burden of the task she had taken on herself, and to become young again among such toys as sea-weeds and shells, or such exciting surroundings as Gothic pillars and tottering turrets.

The prospect of a breath of liberty never failed to raise Dick's spirits, and it did not fail to-day.

"It's going to be just a perfect night," she assured him, and but for the impediment of her velvet train,

would have danced across the kitchen as she said it. "I shall have a headache, and go to bed very early, of course. And if after that anybody hears a rumbling in the walls, why, it's the ghost, of course, or the rats. What shall it be? The ruins, I think—they will be delightfully exciting by this light. Oh, Dick, we're going to forget everything to-night and only be happy, aren't we? Of course, you will be Mrs. Wilson—it is safer, though we are not likely to meet anything but some other moonstruck couple. And we'll take sandwiches with us and pretend we're picnicking. I declare the prospect makes me feel quite hungry. I shall have tea with you, I think. I told Brown to deny me to everybody. Are those scones ready, Dick?"

They were rather more than ready, burnt, in fact, to quite genuine cinders, as is reported of another set of more historical scones—a circumstance which was, however, powerless to affect the spirits of the two grown-up children, who presently sat down to drink tea out of two penny mugs which stood upon a much poker-marked deal table.

CHAPTER XX

"MRS. WILSON"

"It's like something in a play, isn't it?" said a very small person in a dark dress, and with a black lace scarf over her head, to a very large person in a shawl and an obsolete form of poke-bonnet, somewhere between eleven and twelve that night.

There was truth in the remark, thanks to the unavoidably theatrical effect to which moonlight and ruins invariably combine—a cheap effect, one is almost tempted to say, and as the stage-carpenter knows better than anybody, but one that never fails to "draw." If shafted oriels and broken arches are suggestive even in the "gay beams of lightsome day," they are apt to become oppressively so under the "ebon" and "ivory" touch of a clear full moon.

The couple, ensconced within a deep niche and with a miniature provision basket, pillaged already, upon the slab of stone beside them, had, during an hour and more, successfully resisted the suggestions of the spot. The little lady in the lace scarf (which almost looked like a mantilla) had clambered over the big stones and hopped over the small ones, and cleared fallen pillars with the nimbleness of a kitten

and the indefatigableness of a bank holiday tripper ; while her bonneted companion, much more awkward of movement, plunged after her, occasionally swearing in a remarkably deep voice, but more frequently laughing. If at any moment the little lady's spirits had been in danger of being overcast by the shadows around her, she had only to look into her companion's face, or stand still to watch the way in which the voluminous skirts were being desperately gathered together by a pair of huge hands and the trailing shawl rescued from the latest of its emergencies, in order to feel completely cheered up. Until now the determination to make a "lark" of the occasion had triumphantly carried the day ; but with physical weariness came a slight reaction. Having eaten their sandwiches, and counted the strokes of a distant clock, which, through the silence of the transparent air, proclaimed the last hour before midnight, they sobered down enough to realise that the vast aisles among which they found themselves were the walls of an erstwhile cathedral, and that even the stone they sat upon was a tombstone.

"Just like something in a play, isn't it?"

"I'm sure *I* feel very like something in a play," said Dick Cameron ruefully, as he impatiently jerked the fringes of the shawl free from the branches of a bramble which rioted upon the broken floor ; "but not the sort of play that would be played among this sort of scenery. It's traitors and murderers that ought to meet in spots like this, not good old ladies

like me. I don't quite see where I should be in place, unless it were as Charlie's Aunt." Oh, bother that shawl! How can life be worth living to wearers of such garments!"

Elvira laughed again until the wreath on her head shook, she having irreverently crowned herself with a trail of the ivy which at places hung from the walls with the density of tapestry.

"Mrs. Wilson! Mrs. Wilson! you'll be the death of me yet! I don't know how it is that you seem to grow about half a yard the moment you get into those clothes. Beside Dick Cameron I feel only like a sparrow, but beside Mrs. Wilson I shrink to a fly. No wonder St. Damian believes in a giantess. It is rather a wonder that the house holds you at all. Ah, Dick, what would all those dear, good, inquisitive people say if they knew that the House of Riddles is empty at this moment, and that the mistress of Craig Manor is not in her bed! We *have* been clever about keeping our secret, haven't we?"

"Too clever for my own private taste," growled Dick. "I've sometimes been tempted to wish for an accident. It would put an end to the rat-in-the-hole business, anyway."

Elvira slipped her hand over his mouth and her head upon his strangely clad shoulder.

"No tempting of Providence, Dick! You've promised patience, mind! I won't hear an accident even talked of, and the only accident likely to happen here would be a ghost. If ever there was a spot

which had a moral right to be haunted, it is surely this one. Really, now that I come to think of it, those black shadows *are* a little shivery— Was that a bat?"

With a tiny shudder, semi-luxurious and semi-nervous, she crept yet closer to her travestied protector.

"That's right!" whispered the supposed Mrs. Wilson, with quite unmistakable satisfaction, while a strong arm was laid round the supple waist.

During the minute that followed the poke-bonnet inclined downwards, and for the same space of time a smiling, if tremulous, face remained lifted upwards, while any acute listener who might have happened to be lingering within the aisle might have gathered from aural evidence that two pairs of lips had met, and found some difficulty in parting.

"Strikes me that ruins and moonlight have got their uses, after all," remarked Dick Cameron, after that pause, and in a much milder tone of voice. "It's not only for traitors and brigands that they furnish good backgrounds—seems to me that they do pretty well for lovers too—eh, Elvira?"

But this time Elvira did not answer. She had raised her head sharply from his shoulder and was listening to a confused sound which was beginning to detach itself from the breathless stillness of the night. The ruined cathedral stood just clear of the town, and beyond a straggling street which an hour ago they had passed in its usual state of desertion,

but down whose length now hilarious voices appeared to be drawing nearer. Soon they were close enough for the chorus of one of those boisterous songs, familiar to the inhabitants of every university town, to become distinguishable.

"Surely they can't be coming here," said Elvira, below her breath, unconsciously clutching the arm beside her.

"They couldn't possibly be so regardless of the fitness of things," laughed the reckless Dick. "What can undergraduates on the spree have in common with these mouldering walls? They are much more likely bound for the open country."

She was still anxiously lending an ear.

"Dick, they *are* coming!" she murmured, after a long, breathless minute, during which the unseen roysterers still continued to assure the night echoes that there was only "one more river to cross."

"What if they are? The cathedral doesn't belong to them, does it? And depend upon it, even if they shouldn't break their shins over the stones at the entrance—they'll be far too tipsy to see us."

Already the rollicking assurance concerning the piece of water which still remained to be traversed was sounding weirdly hollow between the walls of the old church, intersected by shrill exclamations of pain, as unsteady limbs came in contact with sharp corners.

Elvira looked at her companion in dumb inquiry, not venturing to speak, and was answered by a reassuring glance.

"We're in the shadow," he whispered. "Don't move, and very likely they will pass us by."

He had scarcely said it when a figure in the familiar cap and gown, to which the moonlight gave a fantastically unfamiliar appearance, surged round the side of a pillar.

"A pulpit!" the youth shouted to someone in the rear. "As I live! more than half a pulpit sticking up there! Say, friends, how would it be if I gave you a piece of my mind from that very appropriate elevation? Your condition, both moral and physical, seems to me to be crying out for a rattling good sermon."

"How do you propose to reach the elevation?" chuckled a second specimen of academic youth, appearing beside him. "You're not a bat, though in this light you might be taken for one; and, if I mistake not, that nettle-grown mound represents the erstwhile staircase."

"Lend me your shoulders, and the thing is done. Here, Baxter, I say, don't be an ass, but play the ladder first, and then proceed to summon the congregation."

They came forward arm-in-arm, tittering, in that first, light-hearted stage of intoxication which, as a rule, is innocuously imbecile—their caps sitting almost upon their ears, their glowing pipes hanging loosely from the corners of their mouths. All the attention of which they were capable being absorbed by the ruined pulpit in the corner, which clung there

like the remains of a last year's swallow's nest, they came within a yard of the niche in which sat Dick and Elvira, without paying them more regard than though they had been effigies cut in stone. The first brunt of the danger might have been successfully weathered but for one of those loosely gripped pipes, which, dropping to the ground at a critical moment, sent a shower of sparks flying up to the very hem of Elvira's dress. As she instinctively drew back her feet, the youth, groping for his pipe, caught the movement.

"A rat!" he murmured; and making a tipsy lunge forward, was astonished to find himself grasping a shoe with a very small foot inside it, which instantly jerked itself free.

"A woman! Two women!" shrieked his companion, with a caper of delight. "Ah, come, this *is* rich! I say, Whitley, it isn't a sermon we want to listen to, it's a waltz tune. Ladies to hand—what luck! Never mind that rotten old pulpit—we'll give a ball instead! I say, fellows, hurry up! We've run two women to earth—an old 'un and a young 'un, blooming like violets in the shade. Madam—or is it miss?—your hand, pray! I have the honour of requesting the favour of a—"

But to which especial form of exercise he intended to invite Elvira was never precisely known, his speech being at that same moment cut short by a remarkably square blow, planted neatly in the middle of the face, and proceeding apparently from the larger of

the two "ladies" run to earth, who, at his first words, had sprung up into a posture of defence.

"The devil you will!" came in startling accents from this awe-inspiring person; while, after one preliminary stagger, the frolicsome youth first swayed and then came down with a thud, produced by the contact of his head with the stone floor, upon which he now measured his length with an immobility that was alarming.

An exclamation verging upon a shriek escaped from Elvira's lips, while simultaneously she saw her husband turning, with ominously squared shoulders, towards the second reveller, as much as to say: "I can oblige you too, if desired."

But this young man was evidently far too overcome with astonishment to do anything but stare open-mouthed into the face inside the poke-bonnet.

While they still faced each other, glaring, some black shapes, attracted by the shriek, began to swarm among the pillars.

Then, before the eyes of the half-paralysed youth, a most fantastically improbable thing happened. For first the larger of the two "ladies" tucked up her skirts to a quite unconventional height, revealing most unlooked-for nether garments, upon which, turning to her trembling companion, she snatched her up bodily, and, roughly dispersing the startled revellers who were pressing around the prostrate form of their comrade, dashed away over the broken ground and out into the night.

CHAPTER XXI

GIANT OR GIANTESS?

NEXT morning St. Damian, or at any rate its higher social levels, awoke to a sensation.

Not that it was possible clearly to fix the incident which had taken place within the precincts of the old cathedral ; but about there having been an incident, of a both startling and mysterious nature, there could be no reasonable doubt.

To begin with, there was the plain and palpable proof of poor Baxter, who had been brought back to his lodgings unconscious by his abruptly sobered companions. But even he, when restored to his senses and questioned as to his assailant, gave an account calculated rather to deepen the mystery than to dissipate it, and which, if anything, was surpassed by that of Whitley, who was the one of the company having enjoyed the longest look at the wearer of the poke-bonnet.

"I've never heard of such a female in my life," the revived victim somewhat hysterically assured his comrades. "A nightmare, I tell you. And as for her fist, a sledge-hammer is nothing to it."

"I don't believe she was a female at all," decided

Whitley. "If you had seen the revelations beneath that skirt, you would agree with me. I can swear to the tweed trousers."

"A man in petticoats?" Baxter visibly cheered up, restored to at least a portion of his self-respect. "That's better than having been knocked down by a woman, anyway."

"Well, moonlight is a tricky sort of thing, of course, but all I know is that the very pattern of the check seemed plain."

"As plain, I suppose, as that rat you wanted to catch," commented a supercilious youth, who not having been of the party, preferred to minimise the importance of the incident. "Strikes me you were all in a most favourable condition for seeing visions last night. I suppose it's quite certain that it was a human fist which knocked Baxter down, and not possibly a loose stone falling on his head?"

Then, this suggestion having been indignantly repudiated :

"Oh, well, you know best, of course. But if you were all in such complete possession of your senses as you assert, then why, in the name of marvel, did you let this sexless monster go unscathed?"

To this it was not easy to find an answer; the scene, blurred at the moment of enactment in proportion to their own blurred consciousness, having become more incomprehensible yet by retrospection. The paralysing effects of surprise, and the alarm of seeing Baxter extended apparently lifeless upon the

floor, was all which the academic youths could bring forward in justification of the seeming laxity in pursuit.

Such being the vagueness of the very witnesses of the scene, small wonder if, in the versions which reached the general public, extravagance ran riot. By ten o'clock already Baxter's assailant had become a Russian giantess, escaped from a caravan then making its progress through Scotland; while by lunch-time, he or she was indifferently accepted as a ghost, and as a genuine Sicilian brigand, flying from international justice.

Yes; but her (or his) companion?

This was the point around which—owing to an indiscreet remark made by one of the academic youths, who during the past year happened to have greatly patronised the Craig Manor garden parties—the most burning interest now began to centre. By tea-time this second identity was being quite as warmly discussed as the first; and most warmly of all in Mrs. Annicker's drawing-room, where the same four ladies who last year had debated upon the advent of the stranger, happened to be again assembled.

"Paterson is quite positive about it," explained Mrs. Philips, so electrified by her topic that she quite forgot either to cough or to look tired. "He says he is ready to swear to her identity."

"To whose identity?" inquired Mrs. Kennedy, who at that moment crossed the threshold, looking

as much the widow as ever, and equally much the rodent animal.

"To that of Madame de Logez. You have heard about the scene in the ruins, of course, but perhaps you have not heard that one of the two enigmatical apparitions is supposed to have been our fair neighbour, the Californian."

The widow made a movement with her head, which was equivalent to pricking up her ears.

"Good gracious! And the other?"

"The other," broke in Mrs. Annicker, "is assumed quite as positively to have been the mysterious giantess who inhabits the House of Riddles. Even my Susie, when she heard the personal description, screamed out that the wearer of the poke-bonnet and the shawl could only be the same she had seen entering the door of Number Fifty-three."

"Ah! but there is more said than that." It was Mrs. Philips who had again secured the leading word. "There are people who declare that the giantess isn't a giantess at all, but a—"

"A what?" asked the three auditors, in one single breath, as she paused, the better to taste the delights of superior information.

"A giant."

The three ladies looked at each other, and the lips of the widow dropped as far apart as to disclose her small teeth almost to the roots.

"But how can that be? I thought it was a Mrs. Wilson who had bought—"

"Nobody knows yet how it can be, or even whether it really is. But meanwhile, Baxter swears that it was not a woman's fist that knocked him down, while Whitley is equally positive that it was not a woman's face which he saw at the bottom of the poke-bonnet."

During the silence that followed, the company, with a luxurious shiver of excitement, drew a little closer to the tea-table.

It was Mrs. Kennedy who broke the pause, speaking excitedly.

"But that would mean that Madame de Logez takes moonlight walks with men, dressed up as women."

"And has probably been in the habit of doing so all along. Several of our young men now distinctly remember having caught sight of a big woman and a small woman at different times, both on the links and on the strand, but they have never managed to get near them before."

"I don't believe a word of it!" exclaimed Miss M'Dill, who, until now, had been a fascinated but incredulous listener. "She's not that sort of person at all."

"Well, but what sort of a person *is* she? Remember that we really know nothing at all about her. Of course, she knows how to entertain; but that proves nothing. I always felt a little doubtful about calling, you know, and after what my husband told me yesterday, I begin to regret that I yielded."

It was now Mrs. Annicker's turn to make an effective pause, drawing all eyes upon her.

"It is the new professor of Mineralogy who is my authority. It seems that three years ago he met her somewhere in the Klondyke district, on her way to the gold-fields. She called herself a lady-journalist then, and seemed to be quite poor. Yesterday, when Professor Merritt claimed acquaintance on the links, she laughed the thing off, and declared that she had only been masquerading as a journalist. But the whole affair is a little queer, certainly, and joined to these moonlight walks—"

Mrs. Annicker broke off, raising her scraggy shoulders, and significantly closing her bloodless lips.

Matters at this moment looked so black for the Californian widow that not even Miss M'Dill found anything to say.

"Dear me," mused Mrs. Philips; "who would have thought of such a turn of affairs? And when things, too, seemed to be developing in such a very different and so much more satisfactory direction!"

She finished, with her eyes fixed speculatively upon the widow's face.

Mrs. Kennedy made no feint of misunderstanding.

"Dear William!" she sighed, spasmodically clasping her black-gloved hands. "To think that he is on the point of throwing himself away upon such a—such a—problematical person!"

"This report may make him pause," Mrs. Annicker consolingly suggested.

"It may—if it reaches his ears. But he lives as on a desert island."

Having made which remark, Mrs. Kennedy fell abruptly into a restless silence.

It was afterwards remembered that, though she had been the latest arrival, she was the first to depart.

When she reached the street, her faded cheeks were flushed with an excitement which, for several minutes, had been growing within her, and her insignificantly blue eyes shining with an unwonted light. She began by hesitating for long upon the pavement, and ended by timidly yet resolutely signalling to a passing fly.

On the step of the fly she hesitated again, but finally, though very nervously, gave the order, "Ecclesrigg," after which she hid herself carefully in the depths of the vehicle.

It was by far the boldest resolution she had been guilty of in her lifetime, and even half-way to Ecclesrigg she found it hard to believe that it was actually she who had taken it. Needless to say, that nothing but a sense of family duty could have nerved her to face her dreaded brother-in-law. How could she reconcile it with her conscience to let him walk blindfolded into the clutches of a woman of such suspiciously dark antecedents? A touch of diplomacy in approaching the subject would be desirable, she supposed; and the three miles' drive was occupied by a feeble groping about for the

means. She had not found them yet when the fly turned in at the gates which had once been her own. Looking about her at the familiar surroundings—the fine firs of the avenue, the flash of hot-house glass beyond the garden walls—she felt her wavering determination strengthened. To ward off the threatening danger of a new mistress to Ecclesrigg was, after all, an inspiring undertaking to her particular “dog-in-the-manger” cast of character, as epitomised by Miss M'Dill.

It was in the smoking-room that Kennedy, with a displeased astonishment which scorned concealment, received his sister-in-law—the drawing-room being in a chronic state of rolled-up carpets and linen-shrouded furniture.

“Want anything from me?” he inquired, having pointed to a chair with the stem of a briar pipe, quickly returned to his mouth. He still wore the fisherman's jersey in which he had lately returned from a cruise in the bay, and his thick hair showed the damp of fallen spray.

“Only to see how you are getting on, William. I heard—at least, I thought I heard—at St. Damian's that you had not been well,” faltered the widow, struck by the feebleness of her own little fiction.

“I'm as well as usual,” said Kennedy, not sitting down, as though in advance to mark the interview as a brief one, and continuing to pull at his pipe without any reference to the views of his relative on the subject. “Perhaps it's business you've come upon?”

he added curtly, with a cool incredulity as to the motive alleged, which was admirable of its kind.

"Oh, no ; it has nothing to do with business. But I thought you might be a little lonely ; and besides, I had a sort of wish to see the place again," floundered on the widow, growing more and more visibly agitated.

"Come to the point, please," remarked Kennedy, viewing her from under his down-drawn brows.

Here Mrs. Kennedy's diplomacy abruptly ran dry. As she made the plunge she closed her eyes.

"The fact is, William, that there are such strange stories abroad in the town, and as you—you—know the person rather well, I thought they might interest you."

"What person are you talking of ?" he asked, still indifferently.

"That stranger, you know, the mistress of Craig Manor."

Instantly the indifference left his face.

"Eh ? What's that ?" he inquired, frowning so fiercely at his sister-in-law that her purpose almost failed her.

"They could not help talking, after last night. It seems that she was seen somewhere about midnight among the ruins of the cathedral, and in the company of a person dressed up like a woman, but whom all the witnesses declare to have been a man."

Kennedy, pipe in hand, remained for so long

staring blankly at his visitor that she began to wonder whether he had heard.

"This is lunacy," he observed at last, but in a voice which betrayed a growing agitation. "Who has set this preposterous story afloat?"

There followed an eager but rambling account of last night's events, in so far as they were known to Mrs. Kennedy.

"And they say that this is not the first time, and that all along she has been having secret meetings with the person who lives at Fifty-two Bower Street, and who isn't a woman at all, but a disguised man."

Again he stood motionless for some moments, having first flushed violently and then as abruptly paled. Finally, he stepped up so close to the chair in which the widow sat, that she uttered a half scream of terror, and towered there above her, spilling the ashes from his pipe over her black draperies and evidently struggling to speak.

"It's a lie!" he ground out at last, from between his closed teeth. "It's a hideous lie, and I'll prove it so. Another man? No—no! There cannot be another man. Those boys were drunk, as usual, and because they see visions, you run to me with these insane stories. Why have you told me this? Eh?" he inquired, glaring down savagely at the terrified woman.

"I thought—that—that as you seemed to be rather struck with her—it seemed only fair to warn you—"

He stepped back, laughing deep down in his throat.

"Rather struck! That's good!— Thank you for your kind warning. I'll make use of it yet—never fear! And now, perhaps you would not mind leaving me. I have a visit to pay before night."

"William! Where are you going to? What are you going to do?" she inquired, in fresh alarm, as he turned to the bell.

"Only to clear up this little affair. Nothing like expedition in these things. I am going to ask Madame de Logez for an account of her moonlight walk; and when I have it, I shall hurl back the lie in the face of St. Damian—and in your face before all others, madam."

As Mrs. Kennedy, trembling and flurried, was being led back to her conveyance—not by her host—there was dawning in her mind the question as to whether it might not have been wiser, after all, to leave matters alone.

CHAPTER XXII

THE SURRENDER

FOR Elvira a day of mental anguish had followed upon the dissipation of the night. Ever since the moment when Dick, with huge steps, had borne her from the ruins, the terror of discovery had been upon her. If the man felled by his fist were dead—as, with the recollection of that thud in her ears, seemed not at all improbable—then she might as well throw up the game at once, since police interference of a premature sort would have become inevitable; and even if he were not dead, what chances were there of preserving her secret after the *esclandre* of last night?

That the worst of these contingencies was averted, she now knew by the result of the information collected by Brown; but other items of this information were far from reassuring. Upon two points, the contradictory rumours seemed to agree most distressingly: her own identity, and the grave doubts as to the sex of her companion.

Shut up in her favourite boudoir, and half hidden in the depths of the deepest of the chairs it contained, she turned and re-turned the possibilities of the case

from morning till afternoon, inwardly cursing her own mad imprudence, and in spirit seeing Dick dragged from the House of Riddles to the town jail, thence to be transferred to the hands of transatlantic justice.

She was in the midst of one of these visions when Brown, surging up suddenly upon the threshold, pronounced the name of Kennedy.

So unprepared did the moment find her, that during the flash of a second she feared to succumb to the first fainting-fit of her life. With her eyes on the open doorway, she sat rigid. It was far less than a quarter of a minute that passed before Kennedy's figure filled it, yet that quarter of a minute was enough, since it gave her time to remember that he probably knew nothing of the reports—and before he got to know them, might not her end be gained? At thought of the possibility so close, the blood which had left her face streamed back hotly.

But in the moment that he entered, she saw that he knew. The recognition might well have dashed the new-born resolve; instead, it worked upon it with the lash of despair. If ever the thing was to be done, it could only be done to-day.

From his look, she had expected him to break into passionate speech—an accusation, no doubt, in the moment that the door closed; the very way he had crossed the threshold had been an aggression; but within her presence, a sudden shyness, some abrupt reluctance, seemed to come over him.

With a muttered greeting he sat down, half abashed, and for a few minutes it appeared as though the visit were not going to be more strikingly unconventional than his former apparitions in this same room.

It was, indeed, Elvira alone who spoke, of what, exactly, she could not herself have said, bracing herself, under the superficial carelessness, for the struggle which she knew must come.

It came within two minutes, while she was vaunting to him the achievements of her latest carriage horses, which, in her abstraction, she contrived to mix up with the new terrier, referring to them as "wire-haired," without her listener appearing to be aware of the fact.

"Do you know what St. Damian is talking about to-day?" he asked suddenly.

At the same moment he rose, and making his usual two restless steps towards the fireplace, turned round and faced her.

"About the usual things, I suppose: golf and the summer bonnets."

"They are talking about you."

"Very much flattered, I am sure. I should have thought they had talked me out by this time."

She still kept upon her lips the smile of her first greeting, and only a person in close proximity could have seen that the lips were far from steady.

"Some undergraduates have spread a preposterous

story. They pretend that they saw you in the old cathedral, late last night."

"Were they sober?" asked Elvira, with guileless black eyes uplifted.

"They can't have been; for they also declare that you were not alone, but in the company of a man disguised as a woman."

At the beginning of the interview, Elvira had taken from the table beside her a paper-cutter of Scotch pebble, with which the more effectually to occupy her fingers. As Kennedy paused, she continued slowly to draw it backwards and forwards between the closed fingers of her left hand.

"Well?" he said impatiently, after a moment.

She looked across at him in apparent surprise.

"Well? are you waiting for anything?"

"I am waiting for your version of this ridiculous story."

"My version? You don't mean to say that you expect me to enter the arena with the whole tribe of St. Damian gossips?"

"But they have got to be silenced. Such chatter cannot be allowed. Tell me to contradict the story, and I will do so."

Elvira's reclining figure straightened itself just perceptibly, while the flickering smile on her lips gave way to haughtier curves.

"You? I can't say I understand. Have I ever given you the right to fight my battles for me?"

He shifted the elbow with which he was leaning

on the mantelpiece, pushing his fingers nervously through his disordered hair.

"It is all a pack of lies, isn't it?" he urged unsteadily, devouring her the while with eyes in the turbulence of whose passion there pierced a point of suspicion. "Never mind St. Damian—it is I who want to hear you justified. They are talking madness, are they not, Elvira?"

She rapped her own fingers petulantly with the paper-cutter she held, while another smile, one of a more distinctly provoking nature, reappeared upon her lips.

"I have once before given you my opinion of amateur confessionals. If you have come here to put me through an examination of conscience, then you have wasted your afternoon."

"But your own good name—reflect a little! It is for your own sake that I am asking you to justify yourself."

"Very obliging of you, really. But supposing I don't feel called upon to justify myself to you?"

"Am I not your friend?"

"I told you yesterday what I thought of uncalled-for confidences between friends."

"And if I was—more than a friend?"

Her eyes, fixed on the paper-cutter, were effectually veiled by her black lashes, and her lips were silent, but the provoking smile flickered out again.

"Tell me only one thing: tell me only that the man seen in the ruins last night is not your lover."

"I thought we had not even agreed about my having been to the ruins last night."

"Elvira, I implore of you: is he your lover?"

"Well, sir, he is not my lover," said Elvira slowly; "certainly not in the sense you mean."

"Ah, then you were there? Who is he? Was it actually a man?"

She tossed aside the paper-cutter, throwing him a glance of open defiance.

"Think what you like! I will tell you nothing more. What right have you to question me?"

And her lips closed obstinately.

At the sight, his growing excitement reached high-water-mark. During the space of a second, he turned from her, pressing his two hands over his eyes, as though to shut out the picture of her face, then his arms sank heavily to his sides, like those of a man who is at the end of resistance.

"It's over, Elvira," he said hoarsely, and with that abrupt calmness born of surrender. "I cannot fight any more. I must have your confidence—I must have yourself. Give me the right you speak of. I want to be more than a mere friend. Will you have me, Elvira—such as I am! Say it quickly: will you have me?"

Two fever spots burnt in her cheeks, and something strange and ominous jerked about her lips as she answered:

"Yes—I will have you; I believe that I have got you already."

There was no shadow of tenderness in the voice, rather a clean-cut clearness as of steel ; but the words alone sufficed him.

With arms outstretched and eyes on fire, he made a step towards her, but she was ready for him. Foreseeing the movement, she had sprung up, and, before he could cross the crowded space, had put the table between them. She laughed as she did so, as though to soften the effect of her action.

"Not so fast, my friend !" she said, relapsing into that tone of banter which had done such good service already. "I have a fancy for doing things correctly."

He stopped disconcerted, with hungry eyes.

"What do you mean ?"

She held out her hands before her, allowing her rings to sparkle in the light.

"There are certain accessories belonging to a well-conducted betrothal, are there not ?"

He only gazed at her inquiringly.

"Well—let us say one accessory, which I consider quite indispensable."

She was still waving about her hands, so that the stones would catch the almost level rays which the setting sun shot through the window behind her.

"A ring ?"

She nodded.

"I once heard a most delightful little song—it was Russian, I think ; and it was called 'The Ring.' He offered her laces and ribbons and all

manner of baubles, and *she* spurned them all, and asked only for the little gold ring he wore, as a pledge of his good faith. Well, I am of the opinion of that young lady. Until this empty place upon my fourth finger is filled up, I shall not consider that—that anything has happened."

"You do not trust me?" he asked, with angry reproach.

"How can I trust you, when I have heard you, with my own ears, declaring that you will die single?"

"I meant to, but my fate is too strong for me."

"Give me the tangible proof that it is so."

He laughed, almost gaily for him.

"Shall I go and buy a ring on the spot? What shall it be? Diamond? Ruby? Emerald? You seem to have them all already."

"No; I don't want anything bought. I hate new things—you might know that by this time. My tastes lean towards the antique, as you are aware. Among your family jewels, is there no heirloom that would suit the occasion?"

"I don't remember any."

"Think again! I am sure there must be. Oh, stop!—now I know there is. It was quite lately that Miss M'Dill was telling me of a curious ring your mother used to wear: a square opal, set round with turquoises. That sounds very much to my taste."

To herself her voice was almost inaudible, because of the beating of her pulses in her ears, like that of a person speaking beside a rush of water, yet to him

the words were plain enough. The sudden, stony stiffening of all his features, the dreadful pallor spreading slowly over them, was proof enough of this.

"No, no; not that ring!" he said, with a break of terror in his voice. Then, quickly correcting himself: "It would not do at all; it is much too clumsy, and would be much too large for you."

"But since it is just that ring that I have set my heart upon?"

"Opals are said to bring misfortune—surely you know that?" he said, with a strange new hurry in his lowered voice.

"I am not superstitious. Are you?"

"No—at least, I cannot say. There have been such strange stories about opals."

He was glancing furtively about, his whole bearing betraying that dread of the supernatural to which the most coarse-grained natures are the most easily subject.

"Well, have you made up your mind?"

"I cannot give it you. No; I will not betroth you with that ring."

"As you like." With apparent calmness, she put her hands behind her. "Then that place on my finger will remain empty, for I will have no other."

"But, Elvira, this is childish—a mere caprice!"

"And supposing it were? Is not caprice the privilege of my sex?"

She looked at him with the audacious mutiny of a

spoiled child, her eyes, owing to the nervous distention of the pupils, more profoundly black than ever. There was no more than the breadth of the table between them now ; by leaning across he could have touched her, but something in her face curbed his hot passion.

"You say quite truly that I have all the other things already. I want something unique, and this sounds unique."

He gazed at her in a kind of despair, feeling his senses reeling under the impression of her beauty—deaf and blind to everything but the promptings of his passion.

"And if I bring you that ring?"

"I shall believe that you are in earnest."

"And you will speak? You will knock down all the screens—tear aside all the curtains?"

She made a dumb show of assent.

"Elvira, don't torture me! your consent I have already. Tell me only who was your companion of last night—I cannot rest until I know."

"I will tell you nothing until the ring is on my finger."

"That will be to-morrow. And then you will tell me everything?"

"Yes," said Elvira slowly, with eyes that flashed like daggers, and like daggers seemed to pierce him.

"I will tell you everything to-morrow."

CHAPTER XXIII

"ONE MORE RIVER TO CROSS!"

LEFT alone, Elvira threw herself into a chair with her hands to her burning cheeks, and for a few moments it seemed a toss-up whether, from pure nervous excitement, she was going to laugh or to cry. She ended by doing neither, but instead, sprang to her feet. The necessity of action was upon her. This was not the moment to stop and think of what had been done, and what still remained to do. That way only doubts could lie, and possibly remorse. If the goal was to be reached, it could only be by keeping her eyes fixed steadily upon it, with never a glance to the right or the left.

"One more river to cross!" she said aloud, as the chorus of the undergraduates' tipsy song rang again through her head, as it had been ringing all day, in a stupid, mechanical fashion. "Ah, but it is a swollen river, and very tearing; shall I get across safely, or will I lose my footing in the current? Well, at any rate, I don't mean to stop shivering on the shore—and with liberty for Dick beckoning on the other side, and love and happiness for us both!"

Going quickly to the writing-table, she pulled

towards her a telegraph form, and after a brief moment of reflection, wrote out a long and detailed message. Having re-read it, and found it to her satisfaction, she touched the bell.

To the entering Brown, she said: "Take this to the post at once—yourself."

The Irishman read the direction deliberately, and a little laboriously, and as he read, his features were distorted by a grimace of delight. The message was addressed to the head of Edinburgh detective police.

"Have you got him, Missy? Do you hold him at last?" he croaked. "Bedad, I thought I should never have done ushering that gentleman into the bodoor!"

"You shall usher him in once more—to-morrow; and after that no more—whichever way the fortune turns!"

Brown's face took on a shade of gloom, not beautifying in its effects.

"And when the fortune has turned the right way, you'll be having no further use for me, I'm thinking? Mr. Cameron will be for preferring a sairvent with two straight legs, for sure."

"Instead of talking rubbish, you had better make haste with that message, and return as fast as you can. I have a good many uses for you for to-morrow, anyway, and they will require discussion."

Next morning there came a slight surprise, a detail she had not foreseen, but which, far from disturbing her plans, rather favoured them.

She was at breakfast when a messenger from Ecclesrigg brought her a note from Kennedy, together with a small, sealed parcel. The former announced his visit for that afternoon. To the latter she turned with a beating heart, knowing well what it should contain. Her eyes began by fixing themselves on the seal, upon which the eagle's claw clutching the dagger, and surrounded by the motto she knew by heart, stood plainly out: "Gae ye claw me, I'll claw ye." How often, since making the personal acquaintance of Johnnie's murderer, had she conned it in her mind—how often told herself that nothing in the range of heraldry could have better fitted the man than this ruthless sentence. He had acted up to it too—in poor Johnnie's case.

Elvira's fingers trembled a little as she broke the seal. Inside was a small cardboard box, and lifting its lid with something of a catch in her throat, she found herself staring hard at the square opal, of which she had heard so often, and thought about so intensely, set in a beautifully engraved and evidently antique ring. It was bound to be different from her idea of it; the opal was smaller, the turquoises greener than she had pictured them, but the essentials tallied unmistakably. Lifting it from its bed of cotton-wool, she looked within. Sure enough: the eagle's claw again, and the grim words, worn with the friction of many fingers, but still legible. One of the fingers had belonged to the luckless Johnnie, so fast asleep in his distant grave. With

the ring in her hand, Elvira fell into a brief day-dream, in which the momentous scene seemed to rise up before her mind's eye: the open hut, the motionless body, the rough crowd, the man with bound hands being hurried towards the alderwood.

With a start of terror she came back to the reality.

Leaving her breakfast unfinished, she retired to shut herself into her bedroom, and a few minutes later, the lantern in one hand, the ring tightly clutched in the other, was hurrying along the dark passage. Arrived at the other end, and lifted through the trap-door, she could do no more than dumbly hold out the ring to her husband—breathlessness and emotion having combined to strangle her voice in her throat.

He took it with a questioning look and held it close to the lantern, for they had not got further than the cellar.

"Yes; that's it," he said, with the brevity of suppressed excitement.

At that she found her voice.

"Ah, Dick!"—and already her arms clasped his neck—"I knew it could only be it; but I wanted to hear the words from your lips. We are saved, Dick—we are saved! Liberty is close at hand, at last!"

She paused, as though to sober her own exaltation, then said, rather lower:

"And this, too, is another proof. He felt it easier to send the ring than to bring it. He shrank before

the idea of putting it on to my finger himself, probably with some superstitious dread, for he *is* superstitious—I discovered that yesterday, and I am glad of it."

She was silent for another moment, before adding :
"He is coming to me at three this afternoon."

Dick looked at her with anxious interrogation.

"Before four o'clock, I think the play will be played out."

"But surely it is played out already, since we have the ring?"

"Yes, we have the ring ; but I want more than the ring."

"What more?"

"An avowal. Only then our case will be quite complete."

"And how do you imagine that you will get one?"

"By a *coup de main*. There is no other way, of course."

"There is no way at all. The thing is impossible!"

"Maybe—I don't think so. I believe that before the sun is set I shall have heard from William Kennedy's own lips the confession of his being John Cameron's murderer. And others will have heard it too, though he will not know it. He will speak before witnesses—have I not draperies enough in my drawing-room?—witnesses who are on their way already, for I have had an answer from Edinburgh ; and if things go as

I mean them to go, he will indeed enter the house as a free man, but he will not leave it as one."

"God have pity on him!" said Dick, below his breath.

"Yes; perhaps God will have pity on him—I hope He will. He can afford it; I cannot. Johnnie's murderer, Dick, and your own betrayer; the coward who let you suffer his own deserved penalty! Think of that! I dare think of nothing else. Only one more river to cross! Oh, that I were on the other side already! I must lose no time in preparing for the plunge. It was only to have the ring identified that I came. Good-bye, Dick!—no, Mrs. Wilson—for the last time. After to-day, so please God, there will be no more Mrs. Wilson."

And she managed to command a tremulous smile as she kissed him.

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When Elvira regained her own apartments, she was met by Brown with a calling-card in his hand.

"The gentleman has been waiting for ten minutes in the drawing-room," he remarked, in a stage whisper.

Elvira took the slip of cardboard.

"Thomas Peck, Chief Constable's Office, Edinburgh"—she read; and below, in smaller characters: "Criminal Investigation Department."

"It is well," she said, while a flash leaped to her eyes. "Show him into the boudoir."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE SPECTRE

"FREE-CISELY!" said Mr. Thomas Peck, towards the close of an interview which had taken place behind carefully closed doors.

The gentleman, fresh from the Chief Constable's Office, betrayed in nothing the importance of his office. If he appeared to be fresh from anywhere, it was rather from the golf-links. At St. Damian, in especial, nothing could be more inconspicuous, nothing less likely to attract attention, than the exterior of this stranger in the tweed breeches and deer-stalker. He was a small, well-groomed person, with a limited quantity of very tidily kept iron-grey hair, a pair of quiet but by no means dull eyes, and a delightfully unprofessional manner. Also, he had a habit of precluding his most searching questions by a conciliating smile, which fulfilled some of the conditions of a flag of truce held up. Before members of the fair sex the flag was waved more conspicuously, though solely for professional reasons. During the interview just terminating, it had been much in requisition; perhaps because a long career of successful criminal-hunting rather sharpens than

blunts a man's appreciation of "the sex." *Cherchez la femme* is a motto which, if it had not been invented by a politician, would certainly have been invented by a detective.

"Pree-cisely, madam! I think I can say that I have grasped the case, or as much of the case as you choose to lay before me at this juncture," he added, with a steady side-glance, and an increase of the conciliating smile. "I am of course acquainted with the facts of the Klondyke lynching case; a miscarriage of popular justice is quite thinkable; but you will understand that I will require strong proofs before proceeding to the arrest of—the person we are speaking of, and whom you suspect to be the real criminal."

"It is more than a suspicion, it is a certainty."

Mr. Peck smiled radiantly.

"Pree-cisely! But unless you are able to convey some of that certainty to my mind—"

"Would an explicit avowal from his own lips convey it?"

"An avowal? You have serious hopes of obtaining one?"

"I have; and you shall be witness to it—an unseen witness, of course."

"Pree-cisely!"

Mr. Peck gazed at his interlocutor with undisguised and purely professional admiration. "What an addition that woman would be to the Force!" was the thought which went through his mind.

From her face, his eyes moved round the room with the glance of a *connoisseur*. Nothing was more noticeable about the man than the deliberate inanity of his smile, and the business-like directness of his glance.

"The interview is to take place here?"

"Yes."

"H—m! and the drawing-room has to be traversed—and there are various very conveniently - placed screens in that apartment. Yes—that will do. Are your doors well oiled? Locks and hinges working noiselessly? Well, well; time enough to see to that. It will be better if the servant closes the door behind him, as audibly as possible—that sort of thing gives a wonderful idea of security; and at a judiciously chosen moment I think I can—er—produce a chink without your visitor becoming aware of the fact. There is a good heavy *portière*, I see; I much approve of such things—and my tennis shoes make no noise at all. Tennis shoes are another thing I much approve of."

"And when you have heard the avowal, you will feel empowered to arrest him?"

"I have no warrant with me, but my powers will suffice for the occasion, in the case of the avowal. I presume you would rather not have it done in your presence? These little details are best settled beforehand."

"Much rather not. You will be close at hand, of course; but unless I should call, do not enter the

The House of Riddles

room. You could stop him as he goes out, could you not?—though I fancy his exit may be rather precipitate."

"Hardly too precipitate for my purposes," sweetly smiled the detective. "The moment for—er—abandoning the chink will have to be carefully chosen, of course. I observed a screen somewhere about the middle of the room, which would be a very convenient spot for an ambush. I suppose he is bound to go out by the drawing-room? How about other exits?"

"There is none other except through my bedroom."

"Perhaps you would condescend to lead me through your bedroom? To have a picture of the premises in one's mind simplifies matters greatly."

Elvira rose and led the way to the bedroom alongside. Beyond lay a dressing-room, giving into a passage.

"And this passage leads to?"

"To a back door opening into the yard."

"Pree-cisely! There will be no harm in placing a—gentleman of the Force in the neighbourhood of the back door, just in case he gets wind of his danger and makes a dash for it. But I think that I shall more likely have the pleasure of meeting him in the drawing-room."

Elvira measured the small, dapper figure before her, and felt a fresh alarm.

"But if he resists? He is very big and strong."

"He will be too surprised to resist—and in any case, he is not likely to carry as handy a revolver as mine. Besides, if he should by any chance get past me, there will be a friend of mine at the front door—a remarkably muscular young man, who has given me his company on the journey, and who will be delighted to make this gentleman's acquaintance. This passage is the only exit from here?"

"The only one except the windows."

They returned slowly to the boudoir, where Mr. Peck took up his cap, exhibiting a particularly deprecating smile before his next words.

"It will be a sensational arrest, if it comes off, and a rare triumph of justice. I suppose you wish me to understand, do you not, madam, that zeal of justice is your sole motive of action?"

Elvira flushed hotly.

"Ah, do not trouble to answer me, pray! Only a passing thought of mine, since a thirst for justice for its own sake is a rather unusual attribute of your charming sex. It just crossed my mind that you may possibly have known the unfortunate Mr. Cameron, and may be conceived to find some satisfaction in avenging his memory."

"Well, and suppose I have some interest in avenging him?" she asked, defiantly and unsteadily; "how can that alter the justice of the case?"

"Pree-cisely!" agreed Mr. Peck, who immediately after discreetly withdrew in order to consult with his

professional friend, and having fixed the very minute of his reappearance at Craig Manor.

"Wasn't there a story about the lynched man having been married?" mused the criminal detective on his way back to his hotel. "She's a little tigress, evidently, with the usual touch of the serpent—but no doubt she began by being a turtle-dove. A most interesting case of evolution, evidently."

It was a little before three o'clock that Brown, with a quite unusual nimbleness, born of a furious inner excitement, limped across the big, seemingly empty drawing-room, and having ushered in the visitor, closed the door with something verging on a bang.

Within the boudoir Elvira was not sitting in her usual deep chair. Clad in an unbroken black which enhanced the unusual pallor of her clear skin, she faced the visitor as he entered, the heavy brocade *portière* making an amber background to her slight and motionless figure; for, unable to foresee what dangers the interview might bring, she had elected to remain in the close neighbourhood of her bedroom door. With small hands clasped tightly behind her, and nerves strained almost to breaking-point, she had stood thus for the last two minutes—ever since the door-bell had given to her the signal of approaching action. This time there was to be no attempt at conventionality; what was to be done must be done quickly, under the shock of surprise and without breathing space for the culprit. Nothing had been

neglected that could work upon his nerves ; even the black dress had been carefully chosen.

In the moment that the door closed upon him, Kennedy seemed to read her attitude, if not aright, yet with a sort of confused alarm, born of the chronic terror of the past three years. The interview, on the thought of which he had been living since yesterday, was not going to bear that rapturous character which had been heating his fancy all night—that much, at least, was clear to him.

He had entered hurriedly, with shining eyes, and the haggard look of one who has not slept ; but at sight of the motionless figure in black, he stopped short, disconcerted.

“Elvira ! Is this your greeting—after yesterday ? Your hand, Elvira ! why do you keep it from me ? ”

A moment ago nothing but her lips would have contented him ; but his audacity was abashed by the rigidity of her white face.

She drew her right hand from behind her back, and held it up before him, not towards him. Her eyes, fixed upon the fourth finger, drew his along with them.

“That place—still empty ? ” he faltered. “Did you not get the ring ? ”

“Yes ; I got it.”

“And why have you not put it on ? You said yesterday—”

“I said yesterday that I was not superstitious ; but I believe that you are right, after all, and that

opals are unlucky stones. They carry misfortune with them."

"Is that the reason you will not wear it?"

- "No; I have another reason."

"What other reason? Why will you not wear it?" he persisted, quailing before the answer to his own question, and yet pushed to the words by some force outside himself.

She hid her hand behind her, and raising her head, flashed the words straight into his face:

"Because there is blood upon it."

For a minute after she had spoken there was so complete a silence in the room that the cry of a pair of gulls circling above the house seemed to swell to a shriek. Kennedy's eyes had not fallen—held by the mere power of her will they looked straight into hers—but about his nostrils streaks of a chalk-like pallor had appeared, slowly spreading to the rest of his face.

She spoke again quickly, giving him no time to find words.

"Shall I tell you where that ring was taken from? From the hand of a murdered man."

"You know?" he said, his tongue stumbling over the word and scarcely aware of having spoken.

"Yes, I know; and if I was to you what you pretend that I am, I should have known long ago. Everything open! You speak of the sweeping aside of screens and curtains, you reproach me with my

reticence, and all the time you hide from me the black secret of your life."

The face into which he stood gazing with a sort of tragic helplessness was the face rather of a stern judge than of a tender woman; the eyes were not pleading for confidence, they coldly and masterfully demanded it. For a moment longer he bore their gaze; then, with a gesture which seemed to say that he was at the end of his force, he almost fell at her feet.

"I will hide nothing from you—nothing! I will put my fate in your hands—it seems that you hold it already. There shall be no more curtain between us. You shall know!"

Then in a voice broken by the excess of excitement, and with all that elaborateness of accusation which usually accompanies the long-missed luxury of disburdening an over-loaded conscience, he poured out his confession.

He had loved another woman before her, he did not deny it; and seeing in Johnnie Cameron his rival, he had yielded to an impulse of furious jealousy. The knife had lain handy on the table of the saloon; seeing it, he remembered that his own had been broken that very day. Trying its blade, and finding it good beyond the average, he had been seized by the mad desire to plunge it into Johnnie's heart. Chance had helped him—or undone him—since the younger Cameron had reached his hut alone, and the rest had been easy. It had been but a brief space of

madness, he assured her, and because of those few unguarded minutes he had ever since been pursued by a ghost.

"By one ghost only?" asked Elvira, in a strangely measured voice.

She had listened intently, the colour burning high in her face, and in her eyes a flashing light of triumph. So keenly was she tasting her victory that the thought of the other pair of listening ears alongside was swept from her mind. She was the wife of the injured man only, and the one who had injured him lay at her feet. For the moment nobody else existed. Mr. Peck was as completely forgotten as though he had never been.

"Is it only Johnnie Cameron's ghost that pursues you, and not also Richard Cameron's?"

He had been speaking with his face half hidden in the folds of her dress, his hands unconsciously clutching at her skirt. Now he looked up abruptly, and at sight of the merciless smile on her lips, rose to his feet in a sudden, formless panic.

"Elvira! Why do you speak like that?"

"You must not call me Elvira; my name is Mrs. Cameron."

His eyes widened senselessly.

"You? How? You are—?"

"I am the wife of Richard Cameron, whose life you have ruined."

He kept quite still for a moment longer, as though the better to take in the sense of the words.

"I suppose that means that I am lost," he said at last, very slowly, and, as it were, still struggling with the conception of the thing.

He staggered to a chair, and lay there with his face in his hands. After a terribly silent moment he looked up, a last flickering return of defiance upon his face.

"And if I deny everything? You have no witnesses."

With his words there flashed back upon Elvira the recollection of the pair of ears alongside, and with the recollection she smiled disdainfully. He could not mistake the meaning of that smile.

"You *have* witnesses? A trap, then?"

"Yes; and one that closes well. I have worked long enough at it, God knows!"

His eyes, haggard with terror, shot her one helplessly reproachful look, before moving vaguely round the room, and when he spoke next his voice had sunk to a rough, uneven whisper.

"They are waiting for me outside? There is no escape? Ah, you have caught me well, Elvira! Ah, that opal! that opal! How right I was to mistrust it!"

Then suddenly, at a movement she made, the panic intensified.

"Don't go! Don't leave me!" he entreated hoarsely, springing up and towards her. "They will come when you are gone; I have dreamed so often that they were coming! I have dreamed of

that dreadful cord ! Ah, Elvira, be generous—save me from that cord ! Is there no way ? No way at all ? ”

He was once more crouching at her feet, the last vestige of his self-control gone, his lips loose with terror—all the weakness of this seemingly so brutally strong nature pitilessly laid bare by the threatening horror of his fate. It was an abject spectacle ; and perhaps because it was an abject spectacle, Elvira, looking down into the convulsion of that upturned face, felt a change come over her mood. To see her enemy grovelling at her feet had for three years past been her one desire. Seeing him there, her revenge was not only satisfied, it felt abruptly gorged with the fulness of its own wish. Until now she had been far too strenuously occupied, fighting tooth and nail for her happiness and for her love, to be able to allow herself the luxury of pity. Whatever compassionate feelings, whatever scruples had dared to stir, had been kept down violently, like rebels under hatchways. Now that the end was gained, the guard over the rebels unconsciously relaxed, and breaking loose, they flooded her soul, as mutineers do a ship. For the first time she dared to look her own act in the face, and looking, was touched with shame even on the pinnacle of her victory—with shame and with a sort of contemptuous compassion for the man who, after all, loved her as well as he knew how to love, and who, had he not loved her, could not have been undone.

During no more than the portion of a minute, and while she still gazed into the upturned face, all this passed like lightning through her brain. With the same flash of thought she saw the guards at the front and at the back door, and mentally echoed his own words: "No escape!"

Then still within the same minute, a thought seemed to dawn in her eyes. Bending down quickly, she said in his ear:

"Yes; there is a way. Be silent; come quickly."

She turned to the doorway behind her, purposely left ajar in order to facilitate her own retreat, beckoning to him peremptorily to follow. Without a sound the heavy *portière* fell together behind them.

Kennedy, staring vacantly, understood that they were inside her bedroom. He saw her take something from a cupboard, then still stupidly watching, he saw her approach a big mirror in the panelled wall and go through some process which he did not attempt to understand, whereupon the mirror slid away and out of sight, disclosing a nail-studded door. He heard a key grate in the lock, and then became aware of a gaping opening in the wall.

"Quick now!" whispered Elvira, pointing towards the spot. "There is not a moment to lose. Sharp to the left, ten steps down, then on as far as it takes you—four steps up at the other end, and an electric bell straight above your head—that will open the trap-door."

And, without asking for an explanation, without

time even to harbour a doubt, the bewildered man obeyed mechanically, stepping gladly into the friendly darkness.

As Elvira, with tingling pulses, regained her boudoir, she became aware of the point of a nose protruding from between the curtains which draped the opposite doorway. The nose belonged to Mr. Thomas Peck.

"And your visitor?" he asked, disclosing the rest of his countenance, which showed a blankness of expression very rarely seen upon those intelligent features. "Has he got out the other way, after all?"

"Yes; he has got out the other way," stammered Elvira, in an uncontrollable flurry.

"By the back door?"

"I suppose by the back door."

"Precisely!" remarked Mr. Peck, from mere force of habit, as, without further comment or ceremony, he dashed across the boudoir, through the bedroom and dressing-room beyond, and down the passage he had seen in the morning—in order, if necessary, to lend a hand to the "gentleman" posted there.

For minute upon minute William Kennedy groped forward, feeling his way by the wall, for there had been no time to think of the lantern. How there came to be any place wherein to grope, and whither this strange tunnel might eventually lead him, he never stopped to reflect—was, in fact, quite unable

to consider. His mind, at this moment, could not work beyond the closest circle of impressions. For the time being, it was as disconnected with everything outside the existence of this unsuspected refuge as might be a dismantled telegraphic apparatus. All he was aware of was a sort of rapture of safety, coming upon a moment of mortal danger. It was damp and cold all around him, and the darkness was as pitch; but he could not feel the cold, and the shadows had no terrors for him which could approach these held for him by the light of day.

The time during which he thus groped along, turning corners occasionally, and once or twice feeling the scuttle of a rat over his feet, seemed to him at once very long and very short; but on the whole, more short than long, since the further the passage led him from the spot of imminent danger the greater seemed the chances of security—so that when his feet struck sharply against an ascending step he was almost disappointed.

“Four steps, and an electric bell above my head,” he repeated aloud, having learnt his lesson well.

He counted the steps carefully, and, having first assured himself that nothing but a blank wall faced him, as carefully felt about for the bell. It was not hard to find. Within a moment his finger was upon the knob.

The sound of the shrill tinkle which followed was the first thing which awoke some vague misgivings; for the first time he began to wonder who it was

that would answer that bell. All the questions for which there had been no time at the other end of the passage now began to stir.

He had not long to wait. Very soon a heavy foot-fall sounded overhead, and, as the trap-door lifted with a measured slowness, which spoke of some hidden lever at work, a circle of light fell upon him.

"Elvira! Is it done? What has happened?" asked a man's tortured voice.

"Let me up!" gasped Kennedy, clutching at the side of the opening. "She has sent me. I am pursued."

With a great muscular effort he hoisted himself to the level of the floor above, where for a moment he remained struggling for breath upon his knees, at the very feet of the man who had raised the trap-door, blinking his darkness-blinded eyes in the rays of the lantern.

In his ears an exclamation sounded. It drew his eyes from the lantern to the face of the person who held it. Instantly his jaw dropped, and his eyes started horribly, ready, it would seem, to burst their sockets.

For in that moment it seemed to the pursued man that it was no creature of flesh and blood who had answered that bell, that the trap-door had been lifted by the unreal hands of a spectre, since these were the features and these the limbs of that same Richard Cameron who, three years ago, had been

hung in that distant alderwood among the gold-fields, upon the branch which should have borne his own guilty weight.

With the roar of a hunted animal he rose to his feet, but in the very act, staggered and clutched at his heart.

Before Dick Cameron had time to put out a staying hand, he had stepped backwards into the open trap-door, and falling with a heavy thud upon the steps, rolled down into the darkness below.

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Though St. Damian should stand for a thousand years longer, it is not likely that the day will be forgotten on which, in broad daylight, the door of the House of Riddles was burst open, and an unknown man, in shirt-sleeves, rushed bareheaded into the street, shouting for a doctor.

With that day all the riddles ended; since the same passers-by who had procured the nearest available medical attendance felt themselves justified in invading the premises, even in pouring down the staircase into the cellars below, and to the entrance of that circular chamber at the base of the turret, where the open trap-door still gaped. At the foot of the steps thus disclosed, Kennedy lay upon his back, stone-dead, his stiff hands still clutching at his left side.

"Death from heart-failure" had been the professional verdict, pronounced by the same man

who, not two years ago, had stood beside Geoffrey Kennedy's death-bed. The "family heart" had saved the murderer from the ignominious penalty of his crime.

From that day onward Dick Cameron walked openly in the light of day—but not in that of St. Damian, upon which, for fear of becoming one of the sights of the place, he rapidly turned his back. The conglomeration of so many sensational discoveries: of a secret passage; of a murderer in their midst; of the survival of a lynched man, was almost too overwhelming even for the very considerable powers of St. Damian tea-table talk, and promised to furnish conversational feasts to all Scotland as well.

In the midst of this orgie of gossip there was one person disappointed, that person being Mr. Thomas Peck; for the sensational arrest had not come off, and sensational arrests were the salt of his life. But with his disappointment there fought an admiration which he was at no pains to conceal.

"What an acquisition that woman would be to the Force!" he repeatedly remarked to his professional friend on his way back to Edinburgh. "I could not have done it better myself. But that's the worst of having to do with women. You never can tell when their feelings will come into play. They are tigers at one moment, and in the next, *hey presto!* they turn into Sisters of Charity. But for all that, she's wasted—yes, wasted—in ordinary domestic life.'

There were not wanting some particularly

waggish tongues which affirmed that the real disappointment for Mr. Peck had been the discovery of a live husband in the background; and who hinted that, without this slight impediment, the eminent detective would have been ready to secure to "the Force" those valuable talents, even at the sacrifice of his own bachelorhood.

And now there is an end, not only to the riddles, but to the House of Riddles itself; since before recrossing the ocean, in order to enjoy wealth and liberty in sunnier climes, the young couple decided not only to close up the secret tunnel, but also to demolish the walls about which so many sinister legends had gathered, and below whose roof William Kennedy had found his death. The underground passage had served Elvira's ends well, but it should not survive in order to serve other, possibly bad ends. Its day was over. High time indeed that this anachronism should cease to disturb modern nerves.

Number Fifty-two Bower Street is now represented by an unimpeachably conventional, bow-windowed structure, inhabited by a perfectly prosaic family; while at Craig Manor—likewise passed into other hands—the mirror panel is now a fixture, and the iron door behind replaced by quite commonplace bricks.

The stories about the House of Riddles are still told, but its place is to be found no more.

THE END.

“ILKA”

It was on a dull October day of a year somewhere in the “forties” that, in a small Croatian town, a *Pandur* (member of the mounted police force) descended precipitately from his horse at the door of the chief official of the district.

There was a crowd around him in a moment.

“The post-cart again? Is it possible?”

“Another robbery?”

The *Pandur*, who was very red in the face and very much mud-bespattered, vouchsafing no reply, hastened in to give his report—anxiously expected, it would seem, for he was met on the threshold by the magistrate in person.

“Again?” he asked quickly.

The *Pandur* saluted before replying.

“Again; and as badly as ever. The post-bag clean gone, and most of the parcels too. Our bare lives and the horses—that is about all we carried away with us. It is by the mercy of God alone that murder was not committed last night.”

“And at the same place again?”

“Almost the same; the top of the long hill between Byptyk and Luma.” They seemed to grow

out of the forest, just as though the trees had got legs, and to close around us in a moment."

"How many of them?"

"I should put them at between ten and twelve. What could two of us do against a dozen?"

"And all mounted?"

"All that I could see; and with faces as black as chimney-sweeps."

"And could you not see anything of their dress? Was it the costume of the country?"

The *Pandur* rubbed his red ear perplexedly.

"It was a costume, certainly, but none that I could put a name to. The fellow who fired at me seemed all fluttering with red ribbons, and I could almost swear that the leader had a lady's hat upon his head. Rigged out for a fancy-ball, that's what they appeared to be."

The magistrate sat down in a discouraged fashion.

"This grows more and more mysterious. We shall have to ask for military assistance. I suppose that Colonel Nagy would have no objection to lending us some of his hussars. There's a troop of them quartered at Luma, and hussars would, at any rate, be a match for brigands. Really, one would suppose we were living in the Middle Ages or in Sicily."

He spoke with obvious irritation, and no wonder. It was close upon three months now that these unexplained and apparently inexplicable highway

robberies had been weighing upon his official conscience, and keeping the country-side in a state of chronic terror. Brigands of any sort were bad enough, but brigands who possessed horses as well as fire-arms were doubly difficult to deal with. Out of the ground they seemed to have started overnight in this rustic district, overgrown indeed with vast tracts of forest, but peaceable for decades past under the beneficent Austrian rule, nor devoid either of natural protectors, since within twenty miles around an extremely smart and efficacious hussar regiment had been quartered for about a year past. Scarcely a village that had not its handful of troopers, black-eyed, fierce-looking *magyars*, liable to be called out on any emergency. And yet, despite the presence of these mightily mustachioed warriors, highway robbery flourished, and seemed to defy detection !

Theories to explain the startling phenomena were, of course, not wanting. The brigands were gypsies, Turks—some men, arguing from the fantastic details of their attire, asserted them to be women—while others were equally convinced of their being evil spirits. Rewards for their detection had been offered in vain, the country scoured for miles around, with the same results. That they should find hiding-places for themselves by daylight seemed conceivable enough, but where could they find hiding-places for their horses without exciting suspicion? It was to this circumstance that the

sustainers of the evil-spirit theory were accustomed triumphantly to point.

Things had come to such a pass that, despite mounted escorts, it was becoming hard to find a driver for the mail-cart. One of these unfortunates had been killed in a nightly encounter, several more or less wounded, a few had had to run for their lives, and candidates for the post of danger were ever more thinly forthcoming. It was to this special point in the situation that part of the *Pandur's* report referred.

"Nothing will induce Kovac to drive again," he wound up his explanations. "He's not hurt, but he's scared out of his wits. He swears that the man who stopped the horses had a pink silk sleeve on his arm, and he concludes that it can only have been the devil. Plain, honest robbers don't dress up like actresses, he declares."

"Well, you must just find another," said the magistrate sharply. "The mail service can't be interrupted, even if a few more drivers *are* knocked down. And the chances speak for a pause in the operations. They never try it two nights running. You can double the pay, if necessary, and we shall ask for a military escort."

"I will do my best," said the *Pandur*, as, not over-hopefully, he withdrew.

In the course of the afternoon he was back again, bringing with him a powerfully-built man of about thirty-five, with a pair of small but very

lively black eyes in a face as brown as a ripe walnut.

"This is the only one I can find," reported the *Pandur*. "Every other man to whom I have offered the post only crosses himself in reply. This one says he is not afraid, and he oughtn't to be either, seeing that he's an old soldier."

The magistrate bent a gracious eye upon the man who bid fair to extricate him from his present embarrassment.

"When did you leave the service?" he quite gently inquired.

"Only last week, Excellency. My time was up on the 1st."

"And you were serving?"

"In the Eighteenth Hussars."

"Ah, our own hussars, under Colonel Nagy! So, of course, you know your way about with horses?"

"That I do, your Excellency. The horses are like brothers to me."

"That is good. But I'm afraid the mounted gentlemen on the road will not behave exactly like brothers to you—in case they catch you. You have heard of the—accidents to the mail-cart, haven't you?"

"I have heard."

"And you are not afraid?"

"It's because of the accidents, please your Excellency, that I want to have the post, more still than for the money. A real battle would be better,

of course; but since it seems that we are to have no war, what other chance can one have of shooting at a man, without being hung for it? To sit in one's village and plough one's fields is a little dull, after all. That's why I haven't gone home yet. We like something more exciting, we *magyars*."

His small eyes sparkled in his brown face as he spoke.

"Oh, that's the way it strikes you, is it? So much the better, perhaps. Well, I only trust you won't get more excitement than you bargain for."

In the stables where the post-horses were feeding, the nut-brown man presently made acquaintance with his new charger.

"They look well enough," he said to the *Pandur*, who watched him with a critical eye as he affectionately stroked their rough necks; "but they are not groomed in the way *our* horses are groomed, and their tails are too long. I will crop them to regulation length, if I may. Ah, if you had seen Ilka's tail! That was a tail, if you like—and her mane! I used to comb it every day, as though it had been the hair of a lady. I would have put red ribbons into the plaits, if they had let me, but that would have been against the regulations. Red ribbons would have looked beautiful in her black plaits. She was as black as a coal, you know, and with only one little white patch between her ears. Ah, I loved her like a sister! If they had left her to me I should still be with the regiment."

"And why did they not leave her to you?" inquired the *Pandur*, mildly amused.

"Because she was found to be too good for a plain hussar. The under-officer who commands the third troop required another horse, and they took away Ilka, and gave me instead an old white brute with the temperament of a cow. I could not live with that beast, after Ilka, and so I took my leave when my time was up— When do we start to-night? And do you think there will be any shooting?"

There was no shooting that night, nor for many other subsequent nights. After this last successful raid the highwaymen seemed to be resting upon their laurels, or perhaps they were shy of the eight sturdy hussars requisitioned from Luma, of whom four rode nightly ahead and four to the rear of the mail-cart. The votary of excitement began almost to despond. This driving backwards and forwards upon a road apparently as safe as a street, and despite the suggestive presence of his former comrades, was almost as dull as ploughing one's fields. Although every night, at the darkest places of the forest, there was an agreeable thrill of expectation, the driver soon forgot even to feel for his pistol. Unless he were to fire it off at the unoffending tree-trunks there seemed small chance of using his fire-arm. While the driver desponded the magistrate "perked up." It almost seemed as though the enigmatical brigands had sought another field, melting

away out of the neighbourhood as mysteriously as they had come. Soon Colonel Nagy began to grumble at the useless employment of his men, upon which the eight hussars were reduced to six, from that to four, and finally yielded their places to the *Pandurs*, who were the normal protectors of the mail-cart.

Christmas was approaching before anything more happened.

The bored driver actually dozed upon his seat, and the *Pandurs* rode leisurely in the rear, quite unmindful of the shadows, when the scene described to the magistrate repeated itself in an aggravated form.

They had just topped a long hill, running between two black walls of forest, when to-day, as then, it seemed as though the trunks on each side were growing alive. From off the immovable shadows other movable shadows appeared to detach themselves, from among the perpendicular forms four-footed shapes to be evolved. Together with the rush of horses' hoofs, there came wild, barbarous-sounding cries, fit to strike terror even into bold hearts—the clanking of chain-bits, the ring of a shot. In one instant the sleeping forest had turned into a miniature battle-field, but a battle of which, considering the numerical difference, the issue could not be doubtful. If there had been a dozen highwaymen last time, their number seemed nearer two dozens to-night.

The driver, starting awake, grasped with one hand at his pistol, while with the other he instinctively

lashed out at the horses. But there were hands at their heads already, and with his weapon still held fast, he felt himself dragged from his seat. As he touched the ground the shot went off, and for a moment he lay glaring up at the mounted man above him, whose head was covered by a cap of ermine, while on his coat gold lace gleamed brilliantly, then a blow over the head knocked away everything from before his eyes.

When several hours later assistance reached the spot, the driver still lay unconscious, and one of the *Pandurs* nursed a wounded leg beside the sacked cart. Soon after the two injured men had been conveyed to the nearest hut, the nut-brown driver opened his small, black eyes, which immediately began to glisten, as was their habit in moments of excitement.

"Is there a *Pandur* here?" he asked vivaciously.
 "I want to make a statement."

The same individual who had procured him his post promptly appeared by the side of the primitive couch.

"What is it, my friend? You must not excite yourself, unless you want to get the fever."

The man raised himself upon his elbow.

"I want to tell you something. I know now who the robbers are."

"Ah! You recognised a face?"

"Yes; but not the face of a man."

"What then?"

"Of a horse. Do you know who are the robbers? They are the hussars of the third troop."

The *Pandur* laughed good-naturedly.

"I told you you would get the fever if you excite yourself. It seems you have it already."

"I have got no fever. I tell you that the man who knocked me down was mounted upon Ilka—as if I did not know the patch between her ears, and every line of her face! *His* face was all smeared, of course, but it can only have been the under-officer, Burkas, since Ilka is his horse."

"This must be the delirium setting in," thought the *Pandur*, but all the same, he stopped laughing.

The driver caught at his sleeve.

"Send to Luma, and have the black mare examined. She must have a ball in her right shoulder; the shot went off in my hand before I had time to take aim. If you find that ball perhaps you will see that I speak true."

"And you want me seriously to believe that the soldiers of his Majesty, the *Kaiser*, could ever be criminal enough to— Why, man, it was from the third troop that the escort was taken for the cart!"

"Exactly; and as long as they rode with us there were no robberies. I suppose those of the escort did not want to disgrace themselves by appearing to be beaten by brigands. But, Lord! how they must have laughed in their sleeves!"

The *Pandur* began to get a little flurried.

"But it is impossible, surely; they are here to

catch robbers, not to play the robbers. No, no; there is no sense in it. What could possibly have moved them?"

"I don't know; perhaps they found it dull at Luma. They are *magyars*, you know. When there is no war, one has to do something for passing the time. Yes; I think I can understand. And they have been clever, too. But they would have been cleverer still if they had done something to the horses' faces, instead of only to the men's."

Within twenty-four hours the bubble was burst.

The bullet found in Ilka's shoulder proved to be the key of the riddle which had caused the chief magistrate's hair almost to grow grey before its time. The investigation, guided by this clue, led to perhaps the most surprising result that did ever investigation.

The explanation of how, during three months, these gallant defenders of their country had, under cover of their uniform, so successfully played the highwaymen, was, after all, very simple. Given thirty men, isolated by their position from outward observation, given a villageful of terrorised peasants, tongue-tied by the threats of the ruthless *magyars*, and partly also bribed by a share of the spoil—the wonder of the achievement was not really so great as at first sight appeared. These spoils were considerable, for on the road through the forest lay the chief communication with the capital. It was from

these that came the pink silk jackets and the braided coats which, while their rightful owners sighed for them in vain, had furnished so convenient a disguise to the *amateur* brigands.

As an examination of outhouses proved, the last haul had been a particularly abundant one, as such hauls are apt to be on the eve of Christmas. Many were the dainties, and many the objects of dress and of jewellery, destined, no doubt, to figure upon the Christmas table, and now dragged to light from out of earth cellars.

Yet is it not too much to say that sordid gain was not the only, and not even the chief motive, which had lured these men to the wild, unrightful adventure, with their rightful leader at their head. It was, as the brown-faced driver had rightly conjectured, the excitement of the undertaking which had most to answer for. Peace times are too slow for the quick-flowing Hungarian blood. The instincts of the great robber-nation had successfully demanded their rights.

THE STORY OF SIX DUELS

I AM an Austrian hussar lieutenant, but I think that by rights I ought to have been a diplomat. It was the affair of the six duels which caused me to discover my unsuspected talents in this direction. Without it I might never have known what diplomacy in general has lost by not counting me in its ranks.

Before coming to the affair itself I must first say a word about the man—I mean the man who was to have fought the six duels, for I am not the “principal” in this story, I am only the “second”—quite literally the “second,” as will soon appear.

My friend and comrade was likewise a lieutenant. Our uniforms, down to the single star on our collars, were alike, but our dispositions were different. He was an unmixed Hungarian, with, to judge from his general demeanour, something like an air-balloon in his head, and something like a decoction of gunpowder in his veins ; while in mine there flowed both German and Bohemian blood, a combination which enables me to take a somewhat calmer view of life than did most of my *magyar* comrades.

Our garrison town, situated upon a sandy plain,

consisted principally of a few gorgeous buildings standing at great distances from each other, and with a wilderness of low, straggly houses, and of bottomless mud between. As soon as a Hungarian provincial town has attained a theatre, a church, a synagogue, and a town-hall, it considers itself constituted, and proceeds to rest on its laurels, without troubling about further developments. A feature of the place—as of all places in Hungary—was the gypsy bands. I don't refer to what English people understand by gypsies, but to the musical performers who swarm all over Hungary, gaining their living by fiddling away—sometimes in wonderful fashion—at weddings and dances, or simply in any pot-house where men are drinking the strong, cheap wines of the country. The Hungarian adores his wine-glass, but he also adores the fiddle. The combination of the two spells for him paradise.

On the evening I am thinking of, I was visiting one of the said pot-houses, in company with Farkas, the fiery lieutenant aforementioned. But Farkas was not only fiery, he was also rather aggressively musical. Neither his finances nor the size of his quarters in the barracks permitted the possession of a piano, but he did what he could to fill this blank in his life by an instrument called, I believe, a *cornet à pistons*, and whose use, between walls, ought, in my opinion, to be prohibited by law. Mercifully for the peace of Farkas's comrades regimental duties were so strenuous as to leave little leisure for cultivating the

gentler arts. The times we suffered most were when in consequence of some *escapade*—not infrequently connected with midnight brawls—he was under sentence of *Zimmer Arrest* (confinement to his room). The nature of the tones which on those occasions issued from his quarters quite sufficiently explained the rather tender solicitude with which his more immediate neighbours in the barracks were wont to watch over his general conduct. And yet the fearful instrument had its uses. Thus the Captain was known only once, on a rather blacker occasion than usual, to have extended the *Zimmer Arrest* to a whole week. His windows were straight opposite to those of Farkas, you see, and there was no rule which forbade the prisoner to practise at his open windows all day, and all night too, if he so chose. The Captain said nothing, being a silent man, but from that time on a suspicious sort of indulgence was to be noted in his bearing towards the musical lieutenant—a certain “winking at” offences which, taken notice of, must infallibly have led to more *Zimmer Arrest*.

As a matter of course, Farkas was *frère cochon* with all the musical performers of the town, and consequently with all the gypsies. This evening, as we took our places in the eating-room, in the centre of which one of the usual bands was at work, the *Primas* (leader), spying him out through the smoke-thickened atmosphere of the place, first grinned in dazzling fashion, and then, closely followed by all

the other instruments, jumped straight from the long-drawn melody he had been playing into a particularly rattling *Csardas*, known to stand high on the list of Farkas's favourite airs. The delighted lieutenant smiled back again at his musical chum, and all seemed benevolence and goodwill until suddenly an unexplained commotion became noticeable at one of the more distant tables. The half-dozen or so of civilians who sat there did not belong to our personal acquaintances, and to judge from the array of bottles before them, they meant to make an evening of it. But that was no reason why they should all be frowning and staring indignantly in our direction. Presently one of them beckoned peremptorily to the Primas, upon which the *Csardas* broke off rather abruptly.

A minute later the little, dark-faced man approached us, crestfallen.

"I cannot play for you to-night," he explained, with a suspicion of "cringe" in his attitude, and looking ruefully at Farkas. "It is the gentlemen at the other table who have engaged me. I had forgotten that. When you came into the room now the Illona *Csardas* seemed to fly straight into my head. But I will play it to you another time."

"Thank you! I can do without both you and the *Csardas*," snapped Farkas.

He had plunged abruptly into the worst of humours, but was, of course, far too familiar with the customs of his country to make any attempt at

persuasion. To have "engaged" the gypsies is practically to have bought them, body and soul, for the space of one night. It is *your* favourite airs, not the favourite airs of anyone else, which they are bound to play—a hundred times on end, if it so lists you; and if you choose to have them fiddled straight into your ear, as tipsy men seem to find some strange enjoyment in doing, not even the haughtiest of *Primas* will dare to refuse.

Farkas's reply was, therefore, a foregone conclusion; but noticing his look as he gave it, as well as the other looks being shot in our direction from over there, I began to scent danger. As far as I could make out across the crowded room the company around that distant table were all young and athletic, while the darkness of their complexions sufficiently showed them to be of the same nationality as my excitable friend. Either my German or my Bohemian blood it must have been which prompted me to separate the explosives before a collision took place, or which, in other words, led me to suggest that we should raise the sitting, and seek out another pot-house, and possibly another *Primas*, whose services might still be on the market. Farkas agreed with suspicious alacrity, but scarcely had I reached the door when I perceived that he had given me the slip. Walking straight over to the inimical table, he planted himself before it—as I afterwards learnt—remarking to everyone in general that he much regretted the mistake that had occurred, but

that he could not be expected to know that "this sort of gentlemen" had engaged the gypsies. Upon which, with an ironical bow, he retired, followed by the entire table-round, loudly demanding an explanation of the ambiguous words.

Fortunately I had remained at the door. Putting the snorting Farkas behind me, I received the charge in a body.

If any of the gentlemen wished to have anything whatever explained, I politely informed them, it was to me that they would be so good as to come, since from this moment onward I became my friend's representative. Perhaps my German "heaviness" acted as a breakwater, for in spite of their obviously burning indignation, and the number of glasses of wine which, still more obviously, they had already consumed, they actually made no attempt to come to immediate blows, and having thrust my card into the hand of the foremost of my assailants, I was enabled to take Farkas by the arm and march him off unmolested, though spluttering.

"You will act for me?" he asked, savagely twirling his moustache as we stepped into the street.

"Of course I will; but only on condition that you leave the matter entirely in my hands."

"All right; but no patching up, mind! Of course I'll fight them all!"

And he rattled his sword against his boot, as though inclined already to pluck it from the scabbard.

"Of course!" I said; "unless they apologise."

Farkas laughed scornfully and joyfully. Evidently he thought there was no danger of an apology.

Next morning, on my return from an arduous two hours in the riding school, I found four unknown young men waiting for me at my quarters. They all looked preternaturally grave, and all bowed to me with a punctiliousness which could mean only one thing. I was not surprised, of course, and during a rather broken night, had laid ready the arguments that were to help avert a catastrophe—for that the idiotic affair of last night must not be allowed to end in bloodshed had been resolved in my mind from the first. It is all very well to bleed, or to let one's friend bleed, for either a good, rattling insult or for a pair of very blue or very black eyes, but because of a bungling *Primas* or an interrupted *Czardas*! Not if my name was Hans Willner!

After a preliminary of introductions, in which four names were mentioned, not one of which I had ever heard before:

"We are here in the name of Bela Kubinny, medical student," a fat but sallow youth explained to me, in what I took to be a purposely funereal tone of voice. ". . . He considers himself insulted in his honour by the extraordinary remark made by Lieutenant Farkas last night, and accordingly demands satisfaction. We wish to consult with you upon the form which that satisfaction is to take. I myself should say that it is unquestionably a case for pistols."

"So should I," chimed in a ferocious-looking young man, whose black eyes positively rolled in his head, and who glared at me as though prepared at any moment to jump straight at my throat.

"The insult being given in a public place greatly aggravates the offence. Nothing but blood can wash out the words that were spoken."

"And whom do you represent, sir?" I inquired, with intensified politeness, as I turned in his direction.

"Geza Szappanyas, notary."

"And Mr. Szappanyas, too, considers himself insulted?"

"Deeply. You are not aware, perhaps, that Lieutenant Farkas called him 'a sort of gentleman.' A nice *sort* of gentleman he would be indeed if he could sit still under such an insinuation! No, no; there must be blood—very much blood!"

And he licked his rather thick lips, as though he tasted it already.

"Hadasy is quite of my opinion; are you not, Hadasy?"

Here he rather forcibly nudged a scraggy and nervous-looking individual at his side.

"Yes; I am of that opinion," this person said hurriedly and jerkily, after having twice audibly swallowed before he could get out his voice.

"The affair is, no doubt, a serious one," I began, when there came another knock at the door.

Two more civilians; one of them red-cheeked and ridiculously young, the other elderly and pompous.

"You will have no difficulty in divining my errand," the latter began, a little breathless still from the staircase, "when I tell you that I come on the part of Mr. Feketebatar."

I nearly said, "Who on earth is Mr. Feketebatar?" but stopping myself in time, bowed silently instead.

He then named himself elaborately, and, having cleared his throat, began to get under way.

"The conduct which Lieutenant Farkas considered fit to — ah, to display last night, has unavoidably given rise to much comment. Such conduct I cannot otherwise define as—as—"

"Cheeky," put in the boy behind him, and was immediately quelled by a glance full of unspeakable things.

"Such conduct, I repeat, can only be defined as highly detrimental to that nice sense of honour, which—"

"Come in!" I here said, for my door had again been attacked.

Another pair of total strangers, which signified two more introductions and another initial speech. I began to wonder, with a sinking heart, how many wine-drinkers had sat round the supper-table last night.

Soon I was to know. The next ten minutes brought two more couples of seconds, for, as it turned out, yesterday's company had consisted of a round half-dozen of men, each of whom considered himself personally and specially insulted by Farkas's

ironical remark. This meant that six hot-blooded Hungarians were burning to avenge the supposed slight to their honour. At first sight the matter certainly appeared hopeless, and oceans of blood unavoidable. Of the six furious men represented by twelve scarcely less furious seconds, surely *one* was bound to have Farkas's life! As I lent a distracted ear to the sounds issuing from the neighbouring room—for the *cornet à pistons* was just now working at high pressure—I wondered whether I should ever hear it again, after to-morrow. Nor was my anxiety lessened by the obviously irritating effect which the music had upon the nerves of the "seconds," and no wonder either, seeing that it was the Illona *Csardas* which Farkas had selected for performance. By the way their eyes rolled and their moustaches bristled, it was clear that they were acquainted with the part which the fateful melody had played in last night's incident.

"Gentlemen," I began, a little uncertainly, "since your grievance is common, I suppose I may address myself to you all collectively. It would take rather long, I fear, to talk over matters separately with each pair of representatives. At this rate we should never get to the—"

"To the shooting," finished the blood-thirsty youth. "Just so. Decidedly there is no time to lose."

"Go ahead, please," remarked the red-cheeked boy, with all the frivolity of extreme youth. "What's the objection?"

Upon which his pompous companion first annihilated him with another of his tremendous glances, and then deliberately opened his mouth.

"I am not sure that objection cannot be raised against the correctness of the arrangement. This course is certainly not the one usually—"

"There is one question I should like to ask," I interrupted. "Which of you gentleman were present at the unfortunate incident of last night?"

They had none of them been present, it appeared.

I breathed more freely, even while hypocritically observing :

"That is unfortunate. It would have simplified matters, I think, if there had been more witnesses than myself. Things sometimes sound so very different when described, you know."

I singled out, as I spoke, the only comparatively stolid young man of the party, whose pacific exterior had raised hopes of finding an ally.

But the stolid young man disappointed me by stolidly remarking that things generally are worse than they are described.

"I do not deny that Lieutenant Farkas has been guilty of an indiscretion," I quickly went on, "nor will I attempt to explain the words he used."

"Perhaps Lieutenant Farkas would himself explain what exactly he meant by a 'sort of gentleman'?" put in the scraggy and serious man, visibly brightening. "Must his meaning necessarily have been offensive?"

I looked hopefully towards the new speaker.

Evidently he would do better than the stolid young man, whom I had already mentally dropped as a bad job.

"He's not going to apologise, surely?" asked the Blood-thirsty One quickly, his jaw falling.

"Nothing but the fullest and most correct apology could be accepted under the circumstances," was the Pompous One's verdict.

"I quite agree with you. The only question is from which side the apology ought to come."

For about half a minute they glared at me; then for another half minute I thought that they were going to fall upon me, all twelve of them, and rend me limb from limb.

"Let me explain," I hastily pursued. "You must remember that I am judging from my own eyesight, while you are forced to do so from hearsay. How did the difference arise? The *Primas* was the real offender, of course—but did it not aggravate matters to use this same offender as a spokesman, instead of personally explaining matters to Lieutenant Farkas, as surely would have been the correct course?" (Here I took the Pompous One steadily under my eye.) "Are not such things better settled between gentleman and gentleman than through the intervention of an unwashed gypsy?"

"It does sound as though it would have been more correct," remarked the Pompous One, abruptly thoughtful.

"And more tactful, perhaps," I put in. "Are any

of these gentlemen prepared to deny that there was a certain want of *savoir faire* shown in sending the message through the *Primas*? It stands to reason, surely, that the words used by Lieutenant Farkas can only have been meant to apply to whoever it was who committed this tactless act. It is that person alone who can possibly feel offended—even if occasion for offence be granted. Therefore, it is with the representatives of that person alone that I have to do. Let them kindly name themselves."

In the stage-pause which I made, they all looked at each other so foolishly that my heart felt considerably lightened. Perhaps because they are the people most conspicuously devoid of tact, Hungarians in general ardently covet the reputation of this quality. A *Magyar* would much rather be called a murderer any day than a social bungler. It would take a good deal, as I knew, to induce any of the six principals to "give himself up" as the detected offender in this respect.

"Not that I have any desire at all," I quickly went on—"to exaggerate the importance of an act to which the gentleman in question would probably not have stooped *before* his first bottle of wine." (Here their faces might have been seen unanimously to expand. To accuse a Hungarian of hard drinking is to pay him a compliment.)

"I maintain only that the act was committed, and my friend's irritation thereby sufficiently explained; he, be it remembered, having acted in perfect good

faith, unaware as he was of the *Primas's* engagement. But he does not wish to shelter himself behind that fact, and is ready to give the fullest satisfaction to the gentleman who sent the message."

I made a second stage-pause, filled only by the notes of the instrument alongside. But no one stepped forward, though the Blood-thirsty One was fiercely twirling his moustache.

"Whether a mere lapse of tact is a sufficient cause for bloodshed is a question which I must leave to your consciences," I observed, straight at the scraggy young man, on whose nerves I was deliberately attempting to play, and with some success too, as I could see by the shiver that ran over his narrow frame. But even he showed no direct signs of yielding. Obviously, though staggered by this new view of the case, they were passionately reluctant to retreat from their position.

All now depended upon pressing home my advantage before they had time to discover that the wrongs were about equal on either side.

This I proceeded to do with all the wiliness at my command, but of course it couldn't be accomplished in half an hour, nor in one sitting. It was an arduous day for us all. I ate little, and I think they ate nothing at all, for the *pourparlers* lasted till well into the dark. From morning until night all the hired vehicles of the place were engaged in putting down serious and preoccupied young men before the barrack gates, then—another conference

being over—driving back to the town in the nearest thing they could achieve to a gallop, in order to consult with their “principals.” Taken thus separately or in pairs, they were not much easier to deal with than they had been *en masse*, my chief difficulty being in disentangling the different sets of seconds, and remembering which of them belonged together, and of whom they were the representatives. I knew that the Pompous and the Frivolous Ones, the Blood-thirsty and the Nervous Ones ran in couples, because the first was always annihilating the second (to whom the whole affair was obviously a “lark”), while the third-mentioned lost no opportunity of stirring up the blood of his unworthy companion; but which of the two couples represented the offended notary, and which the aggrieved medical student—or was it perhaps the landed proprietor, or the budding lawyer?—and whether it was a principal or a “second” who answered to the melodious names of Feketebatar and Szappanyas, were points upon which my overworked memory flatly refused to react, a circumstance which was all the more critical, as any vagueness touching identity would undoubtedly have meant a new and deadly offence—bound to lead to a fresh set of challenges and a quite incalculable amount of bloodshed. There were short ones and long ones among them, fat ones and thin ones, young ones and elderly ones, but all I could do was to make a guess at their individualities, and proceed accordingly, humouring

the fanatic for "corectness" to the top of his bent, and drawing for the obviously nervous man the most appalling pictures possible of the probable results of the duel. (Subsequently I found out that he was accustomed to faint at the sight of blood, which explained much.) Needless to say that the conferences were of very different length and frequency, corresponding to the different temperaments of the different principals and to the susceptibility of their respective senses of honour. It was the notary's honour, strangely enough, which required the most careful handling—notaries being, in other countries at least, more generally associated with the shedding of ink than of blood. Both my eloquence and my diplomacy were well-nigh exhausted by the time I had succeeded in soothing the ruffled pride of the man of pen-and-paper.

To cut a long story short, the end of the *pour-parlers*, and of the reckless expenditure in cabs, was that the six principals, not one of whom would name himself as the perpetrator of the "tactlessness" afore-mentioned, elected to apologise in a body to Lieutenant Farkas (to the deep disappointment of the Blood-thirsty One, and scarcely less of the Lieutenant himself), after which effort, Hungarian fury being nearly allied to straw-fire, and the national good-nature gaining the upper hand, everyone proceeded to swear eternal friendship all round, the event being celebrated by booking the same gipsy band which had begun by being the

bone of contention, and drinking hard until dawn, to the music of innumerable *Czardas*!

At that bout, at which not one of the six principals or of the twelve seconds was awanting, and at which the Blood-thirsty One drowned his disappointment so successfully as to have to be carried home on a shutter, I am not too modest to admit that I played a conspicuous part—was, in fact, celebrated as something of a hero, being universally congratulated upon the success of my negotiations, and even honoured by a felicitation from the Pompous One upon the “correct” way in which I had conducted this “delicate affair.”

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Whenever nowadays any civilian, of whose identity I am not sure, takes off his hat to me in the street, I am always perfectly safe to conclude that he is one of the dozen seconds whose visiting-cards I have lying at home. Really, it would seem that in that one day I had made acquaintance with about half the town.

“Where on earth have you picked up so many civilian friends?” my comrades ask me sometimes, to which I airily reply:

“Seconds, my boy—all seconds.”

“In duels you have fought? Why, there must have been about fifty?”

“No; they were only six—and they were not fought at all, for the matter of that.”

It is the one grand diplomatic achievement of my life. I cannot think of it without feeling that I am wasted in a cavalry regiment.

Clearly, an embassy—the richer in international complications the better—would be the proper field for my talents.

THE TWO MONSTERS

"AND what is the new mademoiselle like?" inquired Mrs. Main of Mrs. Pattington as she stirred her tea.

Mrs. Pattington first gave a look round to make sure that neither of the boys was within hearing, and then bent confidentially nearer.

"A monster, my dear—simply a monster! Not only as ugly as sin, but with the worst put-in glass eye I've ever met. The first sight of her quite gave me a turn."

"You seem to deal in monsters," laughed the pretty Mrs. Main. "That German master I met the other day on the staircase would almost do for a show. I can't think where you pick up these oddities. And aren't you afraid of the dear children's æsthetic sensibilities getting blunted by the sight of too many horrors?"

"They haven't got any æsthetic sensibilities," said Mrs. Pattington serenely. "If they were girls it might matter, perhaps—but boys! It won't keep them from discovering the pretty faces when their time comes. I'm sure I wish it would."

Mrs. Main departed, smiling indulgently. She knew that in this house economy was cultivated

quite as carefully as languages. That Jack and Bob should talk "in divers tongues" appeared as desirable to Mrs. Pattington as that these tongues should be cheaply acquired. Doubtless this French teacher had been secured below market value, simply because it is not everybody who can stand the sight of a glass eye; just as Mrs. Main knew for certain that the Teutonic dwarf who gave the German lessons had been dropped out of ever so many houses for the reason that it was impossible to get the children to take seriously a teacher who stood four feet in his shoes.

It was rather nervously that the "monster" made her entry into the schoolroom next day. The first meeting with new pupils had grown to be an ordeal whose terrors increased with time, instead of diminishing. She knew by heart the stare of astonishment, followed by the ill-disguised grin. What came after that depended entirely upon the good nature or good breeding of the children themselves.

This was to be one of the bad cases, as she quickly perceived. Boys usually *were* worse than girls; and these boys seemed to be picked specimens of that *gamin* class that lives only for "larks," and has never even heard mention made of the "quality of mercy." The bare fact of her being a French teacher would, quite independently of her looks, have made her position sufficiently unenviable, seeing that both Jack and Bob strenuously resisted

the maternal plan of education, which struck them as an encroachment on the rights of the British Human Boy. The last mademoiselle, whose nerves were weak, had been satisfactorily disposed by means of a blindworm which the nine-year-old Jack had secreted in his pocket, and let loose upon the table at the psychological moment. It was this incident—for Mademoiselle Leblanc, having flown in hysterics, had flatly refused ever again to set foot within the Pattington house—which had led to the engagement of Mademoiselle Jardin. Even a Greek profile would scarcely have been of much assistance to her in the administration of French grammar; what then was to be expected from the combination of the grammar and the glass eye?

The intermittent presence of Mr. Spencer, the tutor, a very long-drawn-out and very "exquisite" young man, did not mend matters much—aggravated them rather. The frowns with which, when passing through the schoolroom, he by way of punished Bob's aggressive giggles, were visibly a hollow mockery, and more than once the poor monster thought with her one eye to catch a glimpse of a mutual smile exchanged between Jack and the super-fine youth, who unmistakably belonged to that class of lady-killers who seem to consider the mere sight of a plain woman to be a sort of personal affront to their finer sensibilities.

During the dictation, which, for economical reasons, was made upon slates, the new teacher felt an intimate

conviction that it was not only *le chien* and *le chat* which figured on the dark surface. Jack's pencil was too busy, and his blue eyes travelled back to her face too frequently, not to awake other suggestions. When she caught the movement of a nudge, she knew as well as though she saw it that there was a monster portrayed upon the slate—perhaps not even a much worse monster than the one now giving the dictation. The facilities she offered for caricature were too well known to her to let her be surprised at the breadth of Bob's grin. But for all that, her one eye filled suddenly with tears. Both boys, golden-locked and blue-eyed, had a misleading cherubic air about them, and she felt that she could have loved them, if only they would let her.

She was furtively using her handkerchief when there came a knock at the door, and both slates were promptly thrown down, not without a discreet sleeve having been passed over one of them, while Bob said almost joyfully :

"That's Tom Thumb."

It meant another "language," of course, but even a change of evils is sometimes welcome.

Mademoiselle rose almost as gladly as her pupils, and immediately opened her one eye about as wide as they had opened theirs at the first sight of her, finding herself confronted by quite the smallest specimen of grown-up humanity which she had yet seen outside of a circus. Besides the characteristically high shoulders and deep-set head of the

genuine dwarf, Herr Wurzler had an enormous beard, which, spreading over his disproportionately broad chest and flowing to his waist (not that it had far to flow), put the seal of the gnome-like upon his appearance.

For a moment the two monsters looked at each other, then, before Mademoiselle Jardin had recovered from her surprise, Herr Wurzler executed a bow almost beautiful enough to have come from one of her own countrymen, murmuring his name the while in a deeply guttural voice.

She smiled—that is, she uncovered her teeth—and introduced herself; upon which the two again looked at each other, this time with the astonishment gone, and in its place a sort of interest, as though each had abruptly become aware of some ground of mutual sympathy.

“Mademoiselle is the new French teacher?” said Herr Wurzler, with an interest as warm as his French was execrable.

“*Ah oui*—I am that; *Jawohl*,” added Mademoiselle Jardin, producing one of her few German words, a return, as it were, of his linguistic readiness.

“Your difficulties will not be small,” said the German, as he glanced significantly across the room. “But perhaps you will allow me to wish you success?”

Mademoiselle Jardin came as near to blushing as the leathery nature of her complexion would allow. After the mockery of the boys, the thinly veiled

impertinence of Mr. Spencer, this politeness came like balm upon a wounded spirit. She was actually being treated like any average woman instead of like an oddity; and though the man who so treated her might himself be an oddity, she had for the moment lost sight of this fact.

It was, therefore, with a pleasant, rather than an unpleasant, impression that the first lesson ended.

The trials of the second were much lightened by the thought of the knock at the door to follow. Both the boys and the tutor were almost harder to bear than last time, but in the prospect of a few friendly words from a fellow-sufferer—the "Tom Thumb" had been enough to tell her that he was that—of another little taste of ordinary politeness, there lay a comfort which kept her brave during the ordeal, so brave, in fact, that when, together with the sound of a footstep on the stairs, the words "Tom Thumb" again met her ears, she actually achieved a reproach.

"C'est très impoli de parler de la sorte," she remarked, as judiciously as she was able, and fixing Jack with her one eye, while the other, glass one, remained turned upon Bob, being, as Mrs. Pattington had observed, so badly put in that, except at rare moments, the real eye and the sham one could not agree as to direction. This was a circumstance much appreciated by her pupils, who could always, with some show of plausibility, decline to know who was being looked at and addressed.

Mr. Spencer, in the act of fetching a book, raised his eyebrows in cold surprise.

"Be so kind as to look after their French, if you please," he pointedly observed. "I'll look after their manners, thank you."

"*Mais monsieur*," she began, when already Herr Wurzler was in the room.

The thought of what had just passed put a touch of effusiveness into her greeting. She wanted to show that she, at least, did not see in him a figure of fun, just as she wanted that odious young man to understand that she was not ashamed of her championship.

"*Quel monstre!*" she repeated to herself, as she descended the stairs. But it was no physical monster she thought of; it was a moral one.

It was not long before, to her agreeable astonishment, she became aware that she too had gained a champion.

There had been another slate dictation, and Herr Wurzler had come in before it was quite done—a few minutes ahead of his time. Passing behind Jack's chair, he had abruptly stood still, while that heedless young gentleman still bent over his slate. Suddenly the German master said "*Donnerwetter!*" and snatching the slate from the boy's hands, first spat upon it and then vehemently erased something with his handkerchief. What his beard left visible of his face was distorted with anger, and his small eyes gleamed with as sinister a light as those of

any gnome in a fairy-tale. So malignant a dwarf did he look at the moment, that Jack only gasped, instead of rebelling.

A few days later, Mademoiselle Jardin, looking out French reading-books at the book-shop round the corner, found herself unexpectedly close to Herr Wurzler, whose object, apparently, was German grammars. As soon as he could feel sure of having met her eye, he executed one of his elaborate bows, and then looked at her inquiringly, as though uncertain as to how far, in their first meeting upon neutral ground, the pursuit of the acquaintance was desired.

"*Comme il est délicat !*" was her thought, as she read the question in his tiny eyes, and simultaneously showed her irregular teeth in a smile that was distinctly a smile of encouragement. Herr Wurzler read it aright, for, in spite of having the German grammar already under his arm, he lingered on while she selected the French reading-books, and at her departure from the shop asked leave elaborately to accompany her down the street.

"*Mais certainement, Monsieur—Jawohl !*" was the flurried but ready reply.

When they had walked a little bit, he carrying the French books, of which he had insisted on relieving her, and both of them talking assiduously of the weather—"shop" being avoided, as though by mutual consent—mademoiselle made a plunge.

"What was that Monsieur Jacques had drawn

upon his slate the other day—the day you were so angry. I much wish that you would tell me.”

There was a certain insinuation in the tone as she turned her eye down upon him (having previously taken care to get him on the side of the real eye).

For a moment Herr Wurzler looked as though he were going to get angry all over again. His very beard quivered visibly.

“It was something very abominable,” he said, with suppressed fierceness. “Let us not talk of it.”

“But I wish to know—*ich bitte sie!*”

“I will not tell you,” said the obstinate dwarf.

“Then I will tell you!” she burst out. “It was a picture of me, a caricature, perhaps drawn in the semblance of a toad, of a cat, *que sais je?* Ah! I have seen them before, *Jawohl!*”

“But, mademoiselle,” he attempted to put in, but she was not to be stopped.

“Ah, leave me! It is not the first time, and it won’t be the last time either. Those children have no mercy—nor their parents either,” she added, under her breath.

The dwarf laughed defiantly.

“*Mércy!* who wants their mercy? Because one happens to be different from what they are, is that a reason to hang one’s peace on their judgment? Do you think I care whether they wag their heads at me because I am a few inches shorter than they are? Not a bit of it! They think to be cruel—ah, yes; but I snap my finger at their cruelty.”

In an impartial observer the bluster of the tone might have awakened suspicions, but mademoiselle was not an impartial observer. To her it was all genuine bravery and disdain.

"I wish I too could snap my fingers," she said, with a farewell gesture, for alas! the door of the Patingtons' abode was already reached. "But it was good of you, to reprove the boy," she added fervently, "though the tutor really is worse than the pupils."

She went upstairs almost light-heartedly, feeling able to smile at boys and tutor alike. It was not only that she had found an ally, it was also that she had caught a new light upon the situation.

From the first she had looked forward to the end of the lesson, and to the few words exchanged with her successor. Now she began to yearn for it. His gratifying punctuality—a punctuality which often anticipated its time—seemed to show that for him, too, those few minutes of talk had a value. On the rare occasions when he was late, mademoiselle would lingeringly descend the stairs, with a sense of disappointment upon her. To tarry beyond her own hour struck her as unseemly, despite her forty summers.

It was on the occasion of their second meeting at the book-shop close by, for the consumption in grammars was considerable—that Herr Wurzler electrified Mademoiselle Jardin by asking her where she spent her Sunday afternoons, following up the

question by suggesting that they should meet in the public gardens next Sunday, and enjoy themselves by looking at the people coming back from church. Mademoiselle agreed in a fluster. As a rule, she avoided the public gardens as she would a pillory, but with Herr Wurzler by her side, she felt quite strong enough to face their terrors. Although, with true French instinct, she carefully cultivated inconspicuousness in dress, she allowed herself this time to be tempted to a dark red bow at the throat. Anxiously she tried the "touch of colour" before the glass. It was due to her companion, she felt, to look, if not exactly her best, yet her least repulsive.

They did not walk about much when the time came. As though by a tacit understanding they sought out a seat in a comparatively retired walk, perhaps with the unspoken thought that the difference of height was less conspicuous when sitting. Here the church-goers came by in single file, affording sufficient entertainment without becoming overwhelming. Side by side upon their comfortable bench the two monsters basked in the autumn sunshine, and although they espied many smiles and many stares upon the faces of the passers-by, and guessed at the remarks of which they were the subject, they felt to-day quite equal to staring back again, as they made their own remarks.

"Does it not strike you how tiresomely alike most people are?" had been one of Herr Wurzler's first observations. "All made by the dozen, or the

hundred, just as though they were turned out of some cheap factory. Nothing individual or striking; no unique specimens to speak of. And how frightened they are of exceptions! If any man or woman diverges ever so slightly from the standing rule, these poor slaves of convention almost go into fits from pure astonishment."

Mademoiselle laughed quite gaily. The remark struck her as both humorous and true.

"It is true that most people are very *fade* to look at," she almost simpered.

"As though there was only one way of being agreeable to the eye! Such are the prejudices of the narrow human mind!"

At that very moment Herr Wurzler visibly winced, having caught the word "pigmy" on the lips of a passer-by, but upon his companion the incident was lost.

"*Jawohl!*" she murmured, in deep conviction, while he continued to expound his theories.

By-and-by the mutual remarks began to take on a more personal character.

"It's a mystery to me how anyone can admire those pink and white girls with the wasplike waists," said Herr Wurzler presently, with ever-deepening disdain. "Ridiculous dolls that they are! I like something more solid, both about the figure and the colour."

Upon which Mademoiselle Jardin could not refrain from glancing down with a certain satisfaction at her

own ample girth, which quite undoubtedly came up to the description of solid.

"I can't stand these big men," she hastened to remark, with a feeling as though she were returning a compliment; "the long, thin ones, for instance, like that Monsieur Spencaire, they give one a feeling as though they would topple over. Oh, no; I cannot stand them—*Keine Spur!*" laughed mademoiselle, bringing out another of her scanty German phrases, which was likewise meant as a compliment. An assertion and a negation formed about the whole of her German stock-in-trade.

And thus the grotesque couple sat on upon the bench, well-nigh contemptuously sampling the stream of normal mortals that flowed past them—aware of being in another camp from that terribly "average" majority, yet feeling able by joining forces to defy them.

That night Mademoiselle Jardin did not close her one eye until late. Before attempting to close it at all she had scrutinised it carefully in her little cracked mirror. Though it had no living companion, she came to the conclusion that it was not such a bad colour, after all; and did it not almost seem as though Herr Wurzler thought so too? Could it be his innate politeness alone—so unusual in a German—which had moved him to accompany her up to the very threshold of her attic room, under pretence that she might stumble upon the dark staircase?

And he was more than merely polite. Lately she

had been coming to the conclusion that his appearance was—well, certainly not *fade*. It would be impossible to describe him as having been made by the hundred, or even by the dozen. Almost he deserved his own epithet of *unique*. Surely such a beard as his was worth the stature of many men! And how courageous he was—how independent! What fiery words came over his lips, and how his eyes had gleamed as he tore away that slate! They could not have gleamed more intrepidly had he been six feet high.

It was with visions of heroes in her mind that mademoiselle went to sleep at last.

The months that followed were probably the happiest that had yet come to either of the monsters' lives. Hitherto, though only half acknowledged to themselves, they had lived as outcasts. It was not only because they were both strangers, and both toilers for daily bread, that they felt pushed towards each other, it was yet more because each felt shut out from the gentler amenities of life. Bitterly they had been aware of not fitting into the world. Now, unconsciously, they had set about founding a world of their own, a world which was to be ruled by quite new laws of æsthetics. Just as a certain wicked personage once called upon Evil to be his Good, so might the two monsters, had they put their whole thought into words, have cried out:

“Ugliness, be thou my Beauty!”

In this new world mademoiselle soon discovered that her appearance was not only to be tolerated, but celebrated, and in something higher than mere prose.

There came a day when she found in her exercise-book a sheet of paper covered with verses in which *bonté* was made to rhyme with *beauté*; and wherein there was much talk of someone's lady-love, whose soul dwelt in her eye"—the form used (*ses œux*) leaving it pleasingly doubtful whether the plural or the singular was being aimed at.

At sight of the first thing in the way of a love-message which had yet come her way, Mademoiselle Jardin grew a little dizzy. She did not even smile over the thickly sown faults of orthography, although from force of habit she put in the pencil corrections. For the first time in her life she felt that she did not want to change her looks. If, such as they were, they had found favour in *his* eyes, what more could she require?

Presently she set about wondering as to the most suitable response to the effusion. After much reflection and hesitation she placed, with trembling fingers, a picture of Bertrand du Guesclin in the same book which had harboured the verses, having written at the foot: "What has size to do with greatness?"

For a moment she thought of signing her name: "Valentine Jardin," but modestly refrained.

There followed an interval of anguish of soul, caused by the fear lest he should take the reference

to his stature as too offensively personal—and speedily relieved by the discovery of a second set of verses in the same place.

Despite the exchange of veiled messages, despite even her blushing encouragement—for about this time the one eye began to do work for two—it is doubtful whether, without the help of external circumstances, her hero would ever have found the courage plainly to declare himself. Fifty is rather late for learning the tricks of love-making, and Herr Wurzler never had had the chance of learning them before, no woman hitherto having ever treated him as anything but a laughing-stock.

The fortunate accident which occurred was due in about equal parts to those sham cherubs, Jack and Bob, whom the approach of Valentine's Day had rendered more than ever alert to "larks."

"We'll send 'em each a valentine, and each will believe it's from t'other"—thus ran the outline of the plan, prepared by Jack to Bob, the two curly heads having been seriously put together. That "Tom Thumb" and "Glass Goggle" were quite ridiculously polite to each other (not that politeness was not always ridiculous) had not escaped their youthful eyes, though neither had it entered their youthful brains that this politeness could possibly mean that which, between normal people, is called courting. Of match-making intentions both were immaculately innocent. It was to be a "lark," nothing more—the 14th of February always having appeared to them

as a sort of happy cross breed between valentines and April fools.

Presently the idea of sending the valentines—half-pennies for stamps not being plentiful—was dropped. After all, there were much simpler and more economical ways of conveying the offerings.

Jack, who represented the artistic element of the family, was soon busy with the drawing of a scarlet heart pierced by an arrow that might have been a pitchfork, to which Bob, standing for the literary element, contributed the following charming verse :

“ My heart is thine,
Sweet Valentine ! ”

A second composition of equal merit followed promptly, indulgently winked at by Mr. Spencer, who excelled in not seeing things which it amused him to ignore.

The French lesson on 14th February was a restless one on all sides. Not only were the boys waiting feverishly for the moment of putting the crown upon their work, but also there was a half-holiday impending, unexpectedly granted in honour of the day. Neither was the teacher to be called calm. She knew that Herr Wurzler, not having been warned of the half-holiday, would appear at his usual hour. This meant that, unavoidably, they would descend the staircase together. Might it not mean another walk taken in common? And on her own *fête* day too! What good fortune!

When the moment came she was far too busy explaining to him the reason of the eliminated German lesson, to notice how closely the two pupils prowled around them. And yet, owing to the clumsiness of boyish fingers, the plan was only half successful, after all. It was Herr Wurzler alone who left the room with decorated coat-tails.

As, side by side, they descended the staircase, mademoiselle thought to hear titters from over the balustrades, but heeded them not until, just as they reached the landing, something fluttered down from above, to fall at her feet. Instinctively the polite German stooped to pick it up, and in the same instant the Frenchwoman uttered a horror-stricken exclamation.

"Oh, monsieur! what have they done to you?
Ces gamins!"

He looked at her in astonished inquiry, a daubed piece of paper in his hand.

"On your coat—ah, you must not go into the street like this! If you would permit me—"

She put out her hand, and then drew it sharply back, dark-red in the face. Below the scarlet, pitch-forked heart she had caught sight of her own name: "Valentine."

"Ah, no; it is not me!" she protested. "*Quelle indélicatesse!*—to use my name."

By this time Herr Wurzler had managed to get hold of the decoration on his coat-tails and was glaring at it fiercely.

"It is not from you, you say?"

Her reply came vehemently.

"*Jamais de la vie!* I would never do such a thing! *Keine Spur!*"

"Because you require a bigger valentine?" he asked, as he grimly crushed both the scarlet heart and its flowery companion in his hand.

"A valentine? What is that? That is my name."

The first 14th of February spent in England was to Mademoiselle Jardin no more than just her own *fête* day.

"Ah! I was not aware—but the day has also got another significance—in this country. A valentine is what in Germany we should call a—a *Schatz*, that is, a 'heart's treasure,'" blurted out Herr Wurzler, to whose courage the necessary fillip had been given by that daubed rag of paper. "A 'valentine' is the sweetheart you select—only for that one day. But it is a bigger valentine you require, as I see," finished the aggrieved dwarf.

"A bigger? *Grand ciel!* But I hate the big men! They go upon my nerves."

He darted his eyes around, and seeing the staircase deserted, edged a little closer.

"Is it so? Say, Mademoiselle Valentine, will you take me for your valentine?"

"Only for this one day?" she inquired, with a residue of caution, her eye well upon him and working at high pressure.

"For my life!" protested the dwarf, feeling for his

heart under his beard; upon which, she stormily gave him both her hands, and what more might have happened had not a door on the landing above opened, it is hard to say.

Their solitude was at an end, but so were all doubts as to their future relations. So much was clear to Mademoiselle Jardin as she blushing took the arm which he gallantly offered her.

They were scarcely in the sunshiny street when a bunch of the very first primroses was thrust under their very noses. With a mien which struck his admiring companion as lordly, Herr Wurzler took out his purse, and with his best bow he handed her the purchased bunch. No betrothal ring could have spoken plainer language.

Among the various couples turned out in the spring sunshine, there were probably few that felt happier than the two hitherto isolated monsters, of whom Jack and Bob had, all unknowingly, helped to make a pair.

THE ROSE-COLOURED PATCH

THE Vienna *Prater* was at the height of its autumn glory on the September day on which Mali Plha and Pepi Weiss visited it together. At the height of their glory too—their Sunday afternoon glory—were these two young persons; only that Pepi, who had poppies in her hat and a good deal of cotton lace upon her pink barège, was far more glorious than Mali in a flat “Girardi” and a brown stuff frock. Pepi was small, dark, and as lively as a sparrow, with frizzled hair bunched recklessly almost into her rather beady black eyes, which seemed to be everywhere at once. Mali belonged to the class of women usually described as “elephantine.” She had a flat, drab-coloured face, neutral tinted hair braided flat to her head, and huge extremities. As a domestic beast of burden she would probably count double; as a woman, she scarcely counted at all. Both of these young persons wore thread gloves, and both had obtained a “day out” from their respective mistresses, Mali having had to beg the hardest of the two, since being only a “general,” she was proportionately more indispensable, while Pepi, occupying the more exalted position of housemaid, was able to take her Sundays turn about with the cook.

This was Mali's first glimpse of the great Vienna play-ground, for it was not yet a month since she had come to the capital in the wake of a Bohemian family settling here, and during that month a Sunday out had proved unattainable. Now that it was attained, Mali's eyes did not seem big enough to take in all the wonders around her.

"Oh, Pepi!" came over her lips almost every second minute, as she turned her head from the painted representation of a green-tailed mermaid to that of a calf with two heads, and then back again to the fluttering flags of a *Kegelbahn* behind whose wooden walls the balls were merrily rolling. "Oh, Pepi, how perfectly beautiful!"

At which the Viennese girl would laugh shrilly, and tell her to come on, as she believed there was someone waiting for her beside the merry-go-round.

In this surmise Pepi was right. It was a jaunty young man with a foxy moustache curling up to his eyes who joined them at the spot named. At sight of Pepi he grinned, but at sight of her companion the grin turned to a grimace.

"Where on earth have you picked up that dromedary?" he inquired, at the first possible moment, which occurred while Mali was standing lost in an ecstasy before one of the monsters of the merry-go-round. "And is she going to stick to you the whole time?"

"I hope not," said Pepi, with a flippancy shrug. "But I had no choice in the matter. Her mistress

asked my mistress to let me take her out, since she doesn't know her way from Adam. If I shake her off, she'll go astray, and that means a row, of course."

"Has she got no one else to walk about with?"

"She doesn't look as though she would have, does she?" asked Pepi, tossing her hair out of her eyes, and with a merciless twitch about her impertinently red lips.

"That she does not," emphatically agreed the foxy young man.

"And she isn't acquainted with another girl besides myself. She's quite new, straight from Bohemia."

"Bohemia? Oh, I've just been talking to a Bohemian over there in the shooting-booth."

"Fetch him!" said Pepi, with prompt decision. "He may do. They could talk about their country, you know, and so on. Off, Gustl; and catch him if you can."

"Oh, Pepi, I never knew that wooden horses could have real hair upon them," exclaimed Mali, returning radiant to her friend's side.

Within a few minutes Pepi's cavalier was back again, having in tow a big, mildly sheepish-looking youth, with fair hair and a green and purple necktie displayed upon his ample chest.

"This is a countryman of yours, I believe, Fräulein Mali," explained the foxy young man glibly. "He is taking his last look at Vienna before joining his regiment to-morrow. The poor unfortunate hasn't

done his three years' service yet. Perhaps you will undertake to console him for the prospect."

"A countryman? Oh, where does he come from?" asked Mali, flurried and delighted.

"He will tell you all about it himself," laughed Gustl, as the couple moved off.

"At seven o'clock, mind!" Pepi called back gaily over her shoulder, "before the *Blauer Krug*—just in case you lose sight of us meanwhile."

"You are really a Bohemian?" asked Mali, turning to her new acquaintance, with far more than her usual animation. "Perhaps you come from Terbitz?"

"No; but I have been there. I had an aunt who lived there once."

"Oh, I wonder if I know her?"

The aunt was named, and found to be a mutual acquaintance, upon which several other mutual acquaintances were unearthed and various patriotic reminiscences exchanged. In the interest of the subject, Mali quite forgot to look about her. Her companion had very blue eyes, as she could not help discovering, and his amiable sheepishness seemed to her the height of good manners. Also, it struck her that the green and purple necktie became him most wonderfully. Altogether, he seemed to Mali quite as well worth looking at as the picture of the mermaid, or even of the double-headed calf.

"And where are you going to do your three years?" she presently asked, in deep sympathy. "Is it far away?"

"Oh, yes. The regiment is at Witten—quite six hours from Vienna"—(at which piece of information Mali, without quite knowing why, felt vaguely disappointed).

Soon, his shyness yielding to her friendliness, he went on to tell her that he had a good place in a coal store, and hoped to get back again there when his service was done.

Time passed so quickly that Mali was quite astonished to find herself before the Blauer Krug at the appointed time.

"Beer, of course!" said Pepi, as to the sounds of a mixed band playing madly in the adjoining apartment, she took her place before the wooden table. "And sausages, of course. I'm dying of hunger and thirst."

"A sausage—yes," agreed Mali; "but I will do without the beer—it costs too much."

"If you would allow me to treat you," put in her neighbour, with awkward good-nature.

"Of course he will pay for you," decided Pepi shrilly; "same as Gustl here pays for me. Nice cavaliers they would be indeed if they didn't pay!"

Mali demurred, but it being explained to her that the arrangement was strictly *etiquette*, she submitted with a pleasant feeling of novelty.

"We've got to drink Herr Müller's health, you see," explained the foxy youth, as the foaming glasses were put down before them. "The poor wretch won't see Vienna for three years, unless he

has the pocket-money for *Urlaub*. How about that, Müller? Shall we see you here at Christmas?"

Müller mildly shook his big head.

"I haven't any pocket-money—not a single brass farthing."

"Ah, so you're not of the scraping sort," said Pepi approvingly. "You spend your earnings as you get them; that's the way I do."

The big youth merely grinned, while Pepi chattered on.

"I can't stand the scraping sort. When is one to have a good time, if it is not while one's young? Time for pinching later on. Perhaps I'll learn it then. Anyway, I wouldn't have the ghost of an idea how to set about it now."

"Oh, it isn't really difficult," said Mali eagerly, "when once one has begun. There are so many things one can do without, really, and every kreutzer helps. At first I thought I should never get any money together, but it seems to grow on to each other, somehow."

"Oh, then, *you* are the scraping sort, are you? And have you scraped together much, if I may ask?"

The question was most obviously derisive.

"It will soon be four hundred florins."

Pepi's beady eyes dilated like those of some small, startled animal, and even the two men put down their beer-glasses rather suddenly, in order to look at Mali. To all of them four hundred florins meant a capital. The person who possessed them was

certainly worth a more careful scrutiny than had yet been vouchsafed her.

"You see, I began when I was twelve," said Mali simply, "and I am twenty-six now, so I have been saving for fourteen years. And I have never been out of place for more than a few days; I have been very lucky," she modestly added. "So, by being careful, I was able to put by between twenty and thirty florins every year—and that is how it comes."

"How stupid of her to tell her age!" was Pepi's thought, as she burst into a scream of laughter.

"And with all that money you won't afford yourself a glass of beer? Really, by rights, it's you who ought to be treating us all, instead of the other way round, since you seem to be the only one with full pockets."

"I can't do that," said Mali imperturbably, "because, you see, it's all my future. If anything should happen to me I've got nobody at all in all the world to go to, and no relations, not one, who could take me in when I get old. So long as I can work, it seems to me that I ought to save."

"And as long as I can stand, it seems to me that I ought to dance," cried Pepi, springing to her feet. "Come along, Gustl! I can't sit still any longer. Doesn't that waltz just tickle your soles? And you two, just order more beer meanwhile, will you?" with a nod towards the other couple. "And another sausage too; somebody or other will pay for it, I suppose."

And she went off laughing upon Gustl's arm.

Next morning at dawn Mali found it harder than usual to rub the sleep from her eyes, and no wonder either, after the perfectly beautiful dream she had enjoyed, in which the glories of the *Prater* had melted into the glories of dreamland, constituting together a sort of paradise, through whose centre there stalked a broad-shouldered figure with a boyish face and mild blue eyes. It was the first figure which had ever played this part for her either in waking or sleeping visions, as, considering her exterior, was scarcely astonishing. Lovers do not come spontaneously to such as she, and leisure for seeking them out there had been none in her hard-worked existence. Sometimes at odd moments indeed, when she watched the whispering couples strolling about on Sunday afternoons, a momentary wistfulness would come over her, and a sort of revelation of the bliss of having someone to be very fond of one, and whom to be very fond of; for, unknown to herself, Mali possessed a deep capacity for happiness, and as deep a capacity for self-sacrifice, but she did not linger over these thoughts, having no illusions as to her own looks, and understanding humbly that these delights are only for the good-looking people. Both her digestion and her conscience being in excellent order, and her work amply sufficing to fill her narrow horizon, she could not be described as unhappy; but hitherto her life had been exactly as drab-coloured as her face.

Yesterday for the first time, that spark of imagination which slumbers in the most unlikely natures seemed to have been fired, and the hand that fired it was that of the mild-eyed, sheepish youth just starting for his three years' term. The mere fact of his having been nice to her during a whole evening would probably have been enough to gain her heart, for Mali was not used to civility from young men. How good that beer had tasted, paid for by him!—the first glass of beer which she had ever in her life been treated to by a member of the other sex.

So full were her thoughts of him, that when she met Pepi in the market-place (they were almost neighbours in the street) she could not keep her secret.

"Oh, Pepi, do you know what I dreamed of last night?" she whispered confidentially, in an interval which occurred between the purchase of a cabbage and the bargaining for a hen. "That friend of your friend—I mean Herr Müller. Didn't you too find him very good-looking?"

"A lump of a man," said Pepi contemptuously.

Mali almost fired up.

"Oh, no—not a lump—only big; and surely a man ought to be big. What a beautiful soldier he will make! I suppose he has started already."

She could not suppress a sigh as she returned to the question of the hen, while Pepi grinned behind her back. The idea of the "dromedary" having a heart—and so inflammable a one too, as it would appear.

All that week Mali's thoughts were at Witten,

following in the steps of the new recruit. Was he having a very hard time of it? she wondered—and would she ever see him again?

On the Saturday something quite unusual occurred. Her mistress, having sorted out the letters, handed one of them back to her with the words: "That's for you, Mali." She looked at her a little suspiciously as she said it, for during the six years that Mali had been in the house she had never been known to receive a letter.

Mali herself was almost annihilated by surprise, and hastening to the kitchen proceeded carefully to open the envelope with a table-knife. Inside there was half a sheet of letter-paper, covered with a very stiff and cramped sort of writing, which, alas! did not leave her much wiser than it found her, for Mali had never learnt to read. She could manage the capital letters, however, and by the aid of this knowledge was able to make out that of the two names which formed the signature, one began with R and the other with M. Having made this discovery, she sat down rather suddenly upon the wooden chair beside her. She knew that *his* name was Rudi, having heard Pepi's friend address him so during the final and more hilarious stages of the supper.

Her big hands trembled as she took up the envelope again to scrutinise it more closely. There were two printed names there, of which one began with a big W. Just supposing that were to mean Witten!

The impossibility of slipping away to Pepi, in

order to get the riddle solved, turned the forenoon into an eternity. Also, it is to be feared that the severe reprimand for singeing the *Kraut* which fell to Mali's lot that day was not entirely unmerited.

It was when she went for the afternoon rolls that her chance came. She ran all the way, in order to gain time, and with the letter crushed into her hot hand, burst in upon Pepi in Number Fifty-two.

Pepi was ironing in the kitchen, and the cook, a stout, grey-haired woman, was helping to damp the linen, but by this time Mali was beyond minding an auditor more or less.

"There, tell me quick! Is it from him—really from him?" she panted, throwing down the letter before her friend.

"Gracious goodness!" said Pepi irritably. "How you do rush at one, to be sure! I've got no time to read letters now. Give it to Frau Haldan, she can read as well as I."

Frau Haldan, who was half blind, but would rather have died than admit it—and quite rightly too, seeing that her very bread depended upon keeping up the fiction of good sight—hurriedly professed her willingness to serve, and elaborately produced her spectacles.

"Is that Witten on the postmark?" inquired the quivering Mali, in an awestruck voice.

"W-i-," spelled out the old woman. "Yes, to be sure: Witten. Now, let us see!"

Despite the spectacles, it was a laborious task, yet

the two pages got deciphered in time, for though they were cramped, they were almost as distinct as printed letters.

“WITTEN, 5th October.

“MY DEAR FRÄULEIN MALI, — You will be astonished to get this, but I hope you will not be angry. All the week I have been thinking of our evening in the *Prater*. It is my last and my best recollection of Vienna. Fräulein Mali, I can no longer keep silence ; I am obliged to tell you that you have gained my heart—I will not say by your beauty, for I wish to be sincere, but by your good-nature and kindness. What a happy home we could have in future, if you also would give me your heart ! Tell me if this can be. I expect your letter with impatience. I swear to you that as soon as my three years are over I am ready to lead you to the altar—if only you will have me ! The thought of that moment will keep up my strength during the terrible years that lie before me, for it is a dog’s life this life of a soldier. We are treated like the scum of the earth, and fed worse than the Vienna street-sweepers. If you could see how thin is the soup we get for breakfast—and no supper at all ! Of course there are some who buy themselves a supper with the money they get from home, but those are the lucky ones. I and the other poor ones have only the pleasure of looking on while they eat. But I can bear it all if only you will promise to be mine, for I can then think of the suppers which my sweet wife”—(Herr Müller had begun by using the adjective “little,” but had then erased it, probably at a more vivid recollection of his beloved’s stature, which could not be much less than his own)—“will one day cook for me.

“Let me know only whether I may be happy or not, and whether I may leave out the *Fräulein* next time I write.—Your devoted “RUDOLF MÜLLER.”

"Dear heavens, she's taken bad!" said Frau Haldan as she put down the letter, for Mali's drab-coloured face had turned almost white, and she was holding her two large hands to her side, as though in physical pain. Even for her robust constitution the joy was too overwhelming. She had indeed hoped that he might think of her sometimes, and of the pleasant evening together—but this! She had but aspired to peep into Paradise, when behold! the portals were flung wide. Would she have the courage to enter?

"Well, I never!" commented Pepi, as she put down her iron to stare at her friend. "The idea of taking on so because of a proposal of marriage! If I'd wanted to faint at everyone I'd got, I'd have been on the floor most of the time."

"Then you think he means it seriously?" faltered Mali, beginning to recover, and acting with a remnant of peasant caution. "He isn't laughing at me?"

"He *seems* serious enough," commented Frau Haldan, as she pocketed her spectacles. "He's not taken long over it; but some men are like that; and it is a fact that all men are not caught by pretty faces."

She looked a little defiantly at Pepi as she said it, for she had been a plain woman herself, and had yet managed to become a widow.

Mali turned impulsively towards her.

"Ah, Frau Haldan, will you write the answer for me—if Pepi has no time? You know, I never went to school—I had to go into service so early."

"Very well," said Frau Haldan, with a sigh of wheezy resignation. "And what's there to be in the answer, my dear?"

"Oh, that I too have been thinking of the *Prater* all week, and that of course I will be his wife—nothing could make me happier."

"I wouldn't give myself away quite so cheaply," remarked Pepi over her shoulder, with the expert's disdain for the beginner.

But the remark only angered Mali, in whom a certain mild pig-headedness existed.

"If I give myself away, I don't care how cheaply I do it. My heart belonged to him from the first—I know it now," she said, with tears of earnestness in her honest eyes.

"And then," she went on more diffidently, "I will give you a florin to put into the letter. I want him to be able to buy himself supper. It hurts me to think of him hungry. He can't be offended, you know, if we are betrothed. Do you think he would be offended, Pepi?" she anxiously inquired.

"Oh no, he won't be offended; but it's funny that a man should whine about being hungry."

"He doesn't whine!" flared up Mali, for the second time. "He only tells me; and of course I want him to tell me everything—now. I think I will send him two florins instead of one."

"Oh, as you like!" said Pepi airily, as she went on operating on her sheets.

"You will tell him all that, will you not, Frau

Haldan, and sign my name for me? And of course he is not to say Fräulein any more. And—for the beginning of the letter—I suppose I can call him Rudi now?”

She looked breathlessly from one face to the other, her own flushed crimson by the suggestions contained in those two syllables.

“Unless you find ‘Herr Müller’ prettier,” remarked the pert Pepi, while Frau Haldan nodded comfortably.

“I can’t stop to dictate the letter, but you know what I want to say, and I have just got two florins in my purse here, which my mistress gave me to change. I will give you these meanwhile, and here are five kreutzers for the stamp.”

And Mali put down two greasy notes on the kitchen table, for those were the times of paper florins.

“Very well,” agreed the good-natured widow. “I’ll say it all as beautifully as I can, and Pepi will take the letter to the post, when she takes the other letters.”

This was the beginning of Mali’s dream—a dream that was to last for three whole happy years.

It was not long before a second letter came, a letter full of misspelled but overflowing jubilation. “Rudi” seemed so transported with joy at the prospect of calling Mali his own that she began to take counsel seriously with her mirror, wondering whether, after all, she had not hitherto been doing herself injustice. But search as she would, she was too honest to discover in her face anything that explained this ardour of passion. But had he not himself said that

it was her goodness that had gained him, and not her face ?

In this second letter Rudi thankfully acknowledged the two florins received, and described the good things he had purchased therewith for supper ; adding that the memory of them would sweeten the empty days coming, since, unfortunately, the two florins were already at an end.

Mali, without a moment's hesitation, went back to her store. She was to go back to it very often in the days to come. The correspondence, once started, never flagged for a week, though conducted under certain difficulties. Without the help of Frau Haldan—for Pepi never had time to write, though she undertook to post the letters—the thing would not have gone at all. In time Number Fifty-two came even partly to replace the post office, since it was found advisable to have the letters directed there, for fear of arousing the suspicions of Mali's ultra-strict mistress. Pepi indeed affected to turn up her nose at the "lump of a soldier," a taunt which, however, served only to make Mali grow hotter in his defence ; but Frau Haldan's motherly interest was intense, though soon it began to be clouded by doubts ; for the amorous soldier, while full of promises for the future, was equally full of wants for the present. Once it was a uniform which he had damaged and would have to replace, another time he had been ill, and required feeding up, and then there was the chronic need of the supper-money,

which it would have been cruel to stop when once begun. By the third or fourth letter the demands for money were as plain as anyone could wish—hints having evidently been recognised as superfluous. Sometimes it came in a postscript, and sometimes in the body of the letter, but the financial request figured as regularly as does the Amen in the "Our Father." Frau Haldan shook her grey head.

"He seems a very *spending* sort of young man," she remarked to Mali, but Pepi laughed, and said she liked him the better for it.

"It will be quite enough if one of you two does the scraping later on," she pronounced.

And Mali almost agreed, although at moments it would occur to her that it might be advisable to keep some of the savings for setting up house with later on. Once, urged by Frau Haldan, she said something of the sort in a letter, but Rudi seemed so hurt by her hint and reproached her so tenderly with her want of confidence in him, that Mali, deeply remorseful, sent him five florins, instead of the two which she had got ready.

After a year the savings had shrunk considerably, but Mali did not really mind. She went about her work as though in a dream. The weekly letter had become the star of her life. The last was carried next to her heart, and kissed so frequently that the cramped writing regularly got blurred, a special kiss being devoted to the capital W which stood for Witten—that happy place which had the honour

of harbouring Rudi. No longer did she feel a pang at sight of the Sunday couples—what cause had she for envying them? All the monotony had gone from her life. Whether she was peeling potatoes, or cleaning windows, or beating carpets, she could neither feel dull nor tired, with so bright a future beckoning her on. Even the hardest work had become child's play to her, since every day of it brought her a little nearer to that future. To her, the loveless one, love had come; to her, the homeless one, who had thought to grow old sweeping the hearthstones of others, the promise of a home. In the fervent prayers which nightly rose from beside her hard bed, and with the hot petitions for Rudi's welfare, there mingled as hot words of gratitude to the God who had been so good to her.

She never went to any of the places of amusement where Pepi spent her Sunday afternoons in hats and frocks that seemed to grow more and more marvellous, and in the company of young men with every conceivable colour of moustache, for Pepi liked variety in her admirers. Those places cost money, as Mali knew, and it was all the more necessary for her to economise, since Rudi, as she told herself with a smile of almost motherly indulgence, evidently had no economy in his nature.

Once, in the course of the three years, so hot a longing came over her to see her hero face to face that she dictated to her reluctant secretary an imploring letter, begging him to take three days' leave at

Christmas. The answer, as might perhaps have been expected, came to the effect that nothing could make him happier than to clasp his Mali to his heart, but that to come to Vienna for three days would be an affair of at least twenty florins—which, alas! he did not possess. Frau Haldan protested vehemently, and Mali herself felt a little staggered by the sum, but the longing triumphed in the end, and the twenty florins were sent. All the bitterer was it when Christmas Eve brought only another letter. He was desperate, heart-broken, fit to hang himself, but he could not get away. A comrade had fallen ill, and he had to take his place at the barracks. A nice Christmas Eve that would be indeed! Was he to send back the money?

Mali cried with vexation, but of course the money was not to be sent back. He was told to keep it in order to get for himself a belated Christmas tree, and make merry with his comrades.

Another time she begged him for a lock of hair, and got it by return of post.

"It's grown darker than it was two years ago," she said, with a tender sigh, as she held it up to the light.

"That comes from the amount he has been perspiring during the summer manœuvres, no doubt," giggled Pepi.

The three years came to an end at last, as all things do, and so did the four hundred florins. Even now it seemed that the happy moment was not quite reached, for Rudi wrote despondently that, though

he was free, 'the journey to Vienna was as yet a financial impossibility. He was looking for a situation, and hoped it would not be too long before he earned what he required.

For a moment Mali's courage failed her, for alas! she could not answer this appeal as she had answered the others. Then she set her teeth and went to work again, putting aside every kreutzer she could spare, and very many that by rights she could not. During these months she performed marvels of economy. Not one of the ten kreutzer pieces due to her "supper-money" was converted into food, and, rather than go to a cobbler, she stitched up her own shoes as well as she could with blackened twine. When at Christmas her mistress gave her six yards of cotton print for a dress, she sold it at once to Pepi for a florin, though she had not had a new dress for three years.

And yet it was spring before the necessary sum was got together, and before it was quite got together something else was to happen.

During all these years Mali had never again penetrated to that gayest portion of the *Prater* where her dream had begun. She had no clothes decent enough to bear the brunt of so glaring a publicity; but occasionally on Sunday afternoons she would linger alone in some of the more deserted walks, lending a delighted ear to the sounds of merriment which came from over there—for the *Wurstel Prater* had remained her paradise, and she hoped to tread its enchanted ground again by the side of her hero.

On one such occasion it was that the blow fell.

The April sunshine was pouring down upon the glistening horse-chestnut buds when, at a turn of a walk, Mali found herself face to face with a big, square-shouldered young man whom she instantly recognised, and who was coming towards her with an auburn-haired girl by his side. For a moment all the blood seemed to thicken in Mali's veins; in the next it rushed to her head. Regardless of possible spectators, she charged straight at him, and all but threw herself upon his neck, laughing and sobbing all at once.

"Rudi! Rudi! Oh, how could I know? Oh, why did you not come to me at once? Oh, how happy I am!"

To the auburn-haired girl she paid no attention whatever. If she gave her a thought, it was only to suppose hazily that she must be his sister. How could she be anything else?

Suddenly the want of response seemed to penetrate to her consciousness. She raised her head quickly and looked into his eyes, and a sort of shiver ran over her, for those eyes were blank. Both he and the auburn-haired girl, who was rather fat but very pretty, were staring at her open-mouthed, in the way one stares at people who are not quite in their right senses. One or two passers-by who had stood still seemed to share the same impression.

"Don't you know me, Rudi?" she asked, with a vague feeling of pain.

"I have never seen you before," came the unhesitating answer.

Mali grew cold.

"But, Rudi, look at me well—you *must* remember me! Think of that evening in the *Prater*—more than three years ago—before you went to your regiment."

A gleam of enlightenment came over his sunburnt face, which had grown a good deal broader and more self-reliant during these three years, though the blue eyes were as mild as ever.

"Ah, yes—I do remember now. We had supper together. You are Fräulein Kathi, are you not?—or was it Fanny?"

"Not Kathi, and not Fanny, and no *Fräulein* at all, but just Mali—*your* Mali, whom you wrote all those letters to."

Here the auburn-haired girl began to show signs of restlessness, plucking nervously at Müller's sleeve.

"I never wrote you any letters," said Müller, admirably stolid.

For a moment Mali stared at him with an absence of expression on her face which bordered on idiotcy; then she began to tear wildly at the buttons of her dress.

"But I will show you—I have one here. Would you deny me before all these people?" And with shaking fingers she plucked out a crumpled and limp piece of paper, still warm from the contact with her skin. "There! Look at the signature! Is that your name, or is it not?"

Speechless, with an obviously genuine astonishment,

he took it and stood staring at the signature, while three or four people, attracted by the prospect of a "scene," peered over his shoulder.

"It's my name right enough; but it's not my writing."

"A disguised hand, evidently," said the acutest of the lookers-on.

"But no! but no!" almost screamed Mali. "Of course they are from you. Why, there's the postmark on it. Who else would write to me from Witten?"

Müller, aided by the lookers-on, scrutinised the envelope.

"W-i-e-," he spelled out.

"Wieden," completed the acute bystander. "There's a district 'Wieden' in Vienna, you know. Witten is spelled differently—with two t's. Someone has played you a trick, my girl."

The man was not susceptible, but he never forgot the look which Mali gave him as he said it. "I have once seen despair in a human face," he would say to his children in after-days, "and I never want to see it again."

From him Mali looked back at Müller, with a sudden fierce intensity.

"You swear that you are not lying to me?"

"Upon my soul I swear it," said the young man, with an earnestness which carried conviction. "I have never heard of you since that evening in the *Prater*"—"and never thought of you, either," he

might truthfully have added, had he not been too good-natured to do so.

The auburn-haired girl, visibly quieted, had again put her plump arm through that of Müller.

"I might have known that it could only be a mistake," she said complacently. "You have better taste than *that*, Rudi."

It was the word that was wanting to lash Mali to madness. With dangerously shining eyes she turned upon her rival. What she would have said, or possibly done, would be hard to surmise, but at that moment someone said: "*Die Polizei*," and, rather hastily, the group broke up.

With the letter crumpled up in her hand, Mali almost ran back to the town and burst dishevelled and untidy—for she had not even taken the time to re-button her dress—into the kitchen of Number Fifty-two.

"It's a fraud!" she gasped, sinking on to a chair. "Someone has played me a trick—they said so. He never wrote me any letters; he knew nothing about me. I have been cheated, but by whom? by whom? Frau Haldan, help me to find out!"

There was a crash of crockery behind her. Pepi, only just in from her own "outing," and still resplendent in sky-blue alpaca, had inadvertently knocked over a cup on the dresser beside her.

"You haven't met him, surely?" she quickly asked.

Then Mali told her tale, wildly, incoherently, and yet comprehensively enough. During its course

Frau Haldan began to cry so bitterly that Mali looked at her in astonishment. She herself was not at all inclined to cry. There were red spots upon her drab-coloured cheeks, and her small eyes were still shining like points of polished metal.

"I have been cheated! I have been cheated!" she feverishly repeated; "but by whom?"

"Poor soul! Poor soul!" moaned the old woman, rocking her body from side to side.

"By whom?" echoed Pepi, who had done picking up the pieces of the broken cup. "Why, by the man, of course! He has found someone he likes better, and wants to shake you off now—that's clear. I should advise you to keep quiet about it, unless you want to make yourself ridiculous."

Mali laughed savagely.

"Keep quiet? Not I! I will have my revenge!"

The large, meek creature seemed transformed. It was clear that she meant to fight for her paradise. Thrown out of it she might be—but walk out of it of her own free will? Not while she had breath in her body!

"And it is not he who cheated me—I saw that in his eyes. It is someone else."

"Of course it can only have been somebody who knew about the money, and wanted to have it," said Frau Haldan, with an uneasy quaver in her voice, and beginning suddenly to tremble all over her bulky form.

Mali saw her eyes travel over to the sky-blue figure near the dresser, half guessing the while at the

dawn of a terrified idea in the dim pupils. Her own eyes, moving in the same direction, fell with a sense of revelation upon the flutter of ribbons, the gorgeousness of the feathers that decked the brand-new hat—only one in a row of brand-new hats which Pepi had been lately sporting—fell also upon a face which struggled audaciously but vainly to appear composed. In a flash she understood.

"It's you! It's you!" she screamed, springing upon the other girl like an animal upon its prey. "It's you who have taken my money from me, and my happiness! Ah! you shall pay for it!"

The court was thronged on the day the case came on for hearing. There was something so screamingly funny about the idea of the servant-girl who had corresponded with another servant-girl under the impression that it was a lover, that the public simply fought for places. Everyone wanted to see the faces of the heroines of this preposterous drama, as well as of the man who had been so successfully used as a man of straw.

Pepi sat alone in the dock; for although Frau Haldan had been arrested along with her, she had soon been released—only to exchange her cell for the hospital, since the discovery of the villainy to which she had unwittingly lent a hand had proved too much for her elderly nerves.

The sole culprit had found herself too completely unmasked to attempt a denial, and, to judge from

her ornate appearance, counted chiefly upon personal charms for softening the hearts of the jury. If she had written the letters, she explained almost airily, it was only because she had required the money so very badly. Her own wages always melted away in such an uncontrollable manner. And besides, the money was doing nobody any good, shut up as it was in a box. Of course she knew that it was wrong, but the temptation had been too great, and it had been so ridiculously easy to do—whereupon she turned her eyes upon the jury-box in an exceedingly telling fashion.

When questioned as to how she had managed to escape detection during three years, her answer proved once more that what appears a marvel of ingenuity is just as frequently a marvel of audacity.

The convenient resemblance between "Wieden" and "Witten" had much to answer for; so had Frau Haldan's jealously masked blindness, which had made of her so handy a cat's-paw—while her mere interference had served to spread a sort of mantle of respectability over the whole affair. By going down a couple of streets the desired postmark was obtained, and by keeping the posting of the letters in her own hands, Pepi practically ruled the situation.

"Once or twice she wanted to post them herself," the culprit explained brazenly; "but I told her it was better not, as her mistress might catch her at it. I knew she was stupid enough to believe anything," added Pepi, with a contemptuous toss of her frizzled fringe.

The witnesses having been heard, the public prosecutor made a speech quite worthy of his great reputation. The picture which this venerable-looking personage drew of the lot of the unfortunate, who had been defrauded not only of her happiness but also of her hard-earned savings, drew tears from many eyes present, and visibly affected even the innocent man of straw, who, with an auburn-haired girl at his side, now stood among the spectators. When this functionary went on to paint a word-picture of the false friend whose greed and heartless cunning had encompassed this sad result, and called upon the jury for a unanimous verdict, and upon the judge for the severest sentence admissible, things began to look black for Pepi. Her crestfallen look made it clear that she thought so herself. Anxiously she scanned the broad red face of the judge. At the beginning of the proceedings it had struck her hopefully as a jolly face, but now all its jolliness was crumpled up into a severely judicial frown.

When the *Staatsanwalt* sat down again, Pepi in spirit saw herself sentenced to at least five years prison, and began to think that the four hundred florins had, after all, been a bad bargain.

It was then that, amid the expectant silence of the court, her own advocate rose.

This was a very different personage from the venerable prosecutor—well under middle-age, tall and elegantly slender, wearing his *talar* with the *nonchalant* grace of a drawing-room man. He was

almost as well known as an orator as a *connoisseur* in female beauty ; and the fact of so critical a personage having undertaken so very unprofitable a case was generally taken as a high compliment to Pepi's looks.

The eyes now turned upon him burned with curiosity. Would he actually attempt to whitewash his client ? What could he possibly say in her defence ?

The speech started very modestly, and rather colourlessly. There was no attempt at whitewashing. Almost humbly, and to Pepi's own profound disgust, he admitted the full guilt of the unhappy girl who sat in the dock. It had been a villainous act, at the thought of which every person with a spark of honesty in his composition must inevitably recoil. In this point he completely agreed with his honoured colleague. But there was another point on which their opinions obviously differed.

Here, having re-fixed his *monocle* in his eye, he raised his voice by one tone.

" My learned and honoured colleague has told you that by her deceit the faithless friend has robbed this woman of her happiness as well as of her money. In this I cannot agree. How could she be robbed of something which she never possessed ? I would ask the gentlemen of the jury to look at the facts of the case a little more closely, and also to look a little more closely at the chief witness for the Crown. Here is a girl of the lowest classes, and standing on the lowest plane of education. By her own showing, she had reached her twenty - seventh year without

ever hearing a whisper of love ; whether she would be likely to hear one in future I leave to your judgment to decide."

With the delicately disdainful smile of the *connoisseur* playing about his fine-cut lips, he paused just long enough for all eyes to turn upon the unfortunate Mali, who, with a face of stone, still kept her place in the witness-box.

"Here is a life that is all drudgery—all duty. She stands alone in the world. She carries coal. She lights fires. She sweeps floors. She hears her well-favoured companions boasting of their sweethearts, and stands by silent. It is a life painted grey in grey.

"Suddenly into this grey life there falls a ray of light—a rose-coloured patch which transforms it. She too has found a lover, though as yet only on paper ; her moment of happiness has come to her, as to the others. She dreams a dream which gilds the world, and though it be only a dream, has it not made beautiful three years of this dreary life ? Without the illusion of that dream, would the life not have been more dreary still ?"

Then, after another well-calculated pause, and raising his voice by another tone :

"Has she really lost as much as one would have you believe ? and gained so little ? True, she has lost her savings ; but savings are only money, while the happiness she gained—for three years — belongs to those things that money cannot buy. Who can say whether they were not worth the price ?

"Though the friend was heartless, she has yet done for her what nothing else conceivable could have done. Far from having stolen her happiness, as has been asserted, she has procured her the one real taste of happiness she has ever known. She has had her dream ; and in this she is luckier than hundreds of her sisters, that the hero of her dream has not cheated her. Her lover was a creature of her fancy ; but for this very reason he can never prove faithless, as lovers of flesh and blood too often do. And her savings will accumulate again. She is not yet thirty ; and," pursued the elegant advocate, with another of his suggestive smiles, "you have only to look at her to see that she has the constitution of a horse, and will therefore not easily lack employment. I will confess that her lot appears to me less black than that of the unfortuate girl who sits in the dock, and whose giddy vanity, fed large by the poisonous influences of the capital, has succumbed before an occasion too easily enticing to be resisted by such as she. Surely *her* future looms darker than that of the woman who accuses her !

"That woman is indignant, and justly so ; but would she herself give up the memory of that blissful illusion, in order to gain her four hundred florins ? I put it to everyone who has lived through one of those happy illusions himself. And this memory nothing can take from her. The rose-coloured patch will serve to illuminate all the rest of the grey life."

When he sat down again Mali was weeping copiously,

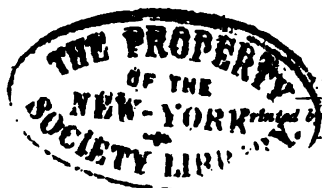
and so were several other people in the audience, only that now they did not quite know whether their tears were meant for Mali or for Pepi. The judge's red face had visibly relaxed, but Pepi herself looked frankly bewildered. There are things that the head alone is not sufficient to grasp ; it requires a heart as well.

The jurymen did not consult for long, and though they brought in a verdict of guilt, it was so strenuously modified by "extenuating circumstances," that the judge, whose jolliness had by this time come again to the fore, could, without exciting comment, pass a merely nominal sentence. Half an hour ago nobody would have believed that the accused would be let off with less than three years prison ; now three months, if anything, was considered rather severe.

At the side-door through which the prisoner, with jauntiness almost recovered, was being led to the cells, a woman in a grey dress and a battered sailor-hat was waiting. Before the attending policeman could interfere she had stepped forward and seized the girl's two hands. To the spectators who had recognised the chief witness for the Crown, it did not seem quite clear whether she was forgiving her or whether she was thanking her.

"After all," she whispered, in a voice still shaken with recent sobs, "it *was* a beautiful time ; and yes, he is right—nothing can ever take it away !"

THE END



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